Nanigashi Shima
Illustration by
raemz

Love Unseen Beneath the Radiant Night Sky

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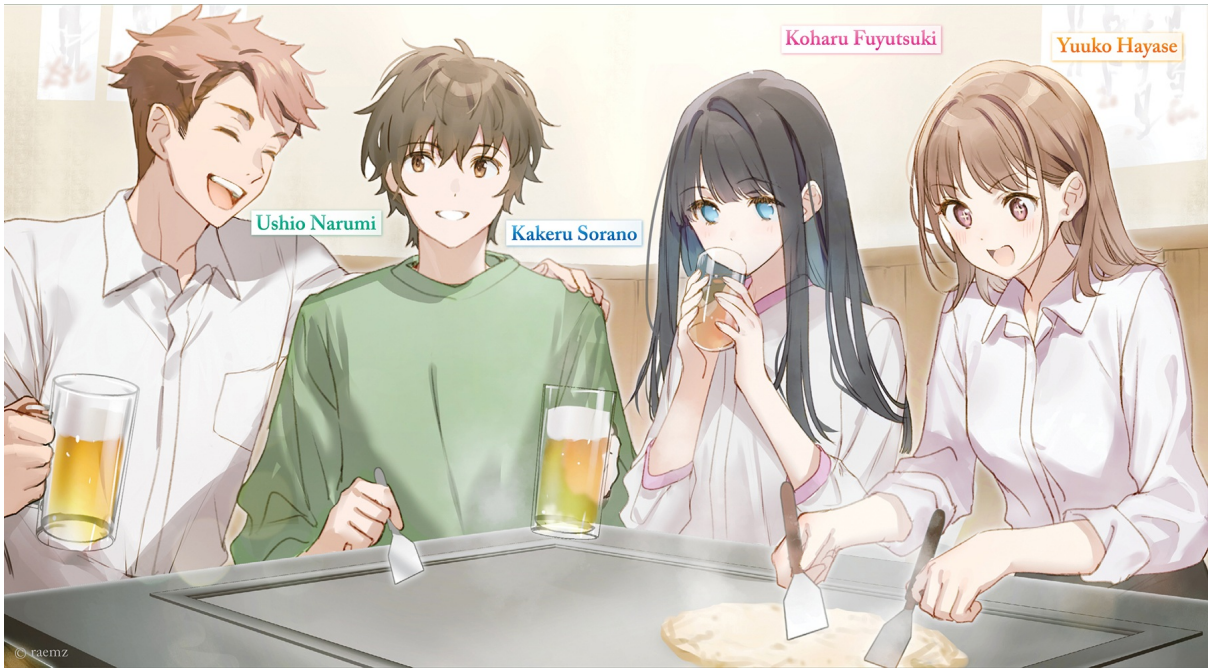

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Nanigashi Shima
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Love Unseen Beneath the Radiant Night Sky

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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Love Unseen Beneath the Radiant Night Sky

Nanigashi Shima

Translation by **Amelia Imogen**
Cover art by **raemz**

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

The dark night of blindness shone with the glory of stars unseen.

Helen Keller

1. Cherry Trees at Night
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♬

It's strange.

For some reason, every time my health took a turn for the worse, I got the urge to listen to Kakeru's version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

I would fumble about for my voice recorder, put in my earbuds, and press PLAY.

Kakeru's youthful voice from when we first met would stream into my ears.

Concentrating on his words as hard as I could, I felt at peace.

♪

"Haaah, haaah, haaah."

I could hear Kakeru panting by my side.

Ba-dum, ba-dum. My heartbeat reverberated inside my body.

I held onto his arm as we ran together.

Since I couldn't see, Kakeru was guiding me along an easy-to-run path.

I could sense his kindness through his actions.

"Good evening," I heard him say.

Huh? For a moment, I was taken aback. *What's he doing?*

But I quickly realized he must have been greeting the people passing by.

That way, they wouldn't think it weird that I was running. Seeing a blind person run must be a rare sight.

I wasn't restricting myself to the edge of the path, either. Kakeru was letting me run right down the middle.

I found kindness like that wonderful.

It was April, and the night air was still chilly. The breeze brushed past my cheeks and down the back of my neck, bringing with it the faint scent of salt.

Every step I took seemed weighed down by my entire body. I felt sluggish. I'd only run a short distance, but I was already out of breath. The cold air I breathed in felt like it was freezing my lungs.

"Why don't we walk for a while?"

Maybe my fatigue was showing on my face because Kakeru slowed down. I adjusted my pace to match.

"I can…still run," I insisted.

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard," he replied, gently coming to a stop.

I rested my hands on my knees as I attempted to catch my breath. There was a strange metallic taste in my mouth.

"My stamina…really has…taken a hit…hasn't it?" I said, panting.

"That's to be expected. You spent so much time in the hospital."

Three years ago, I'd almost lost my battle with my illness—but Kakeru had given me hope. And after two full years of fighting, I managed to pull through.

Last year, I came back from Hokkaido and reenrolled in college. As my first step toward regaining the strength I'd lost, I began taking evening walks with Kakeru.

Today, I felt like running for some reason, so I'd put forward the idea.

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard," Kakeru had said with concern, but I was desperate to test out my stamina.

"How far…did I run?" I asked.

"Uhhh, about fifty meters, I guess."

"Is that all?"

"Work on improving your stamina slowly. Anyway, how about we sit down on the bench?"

"Yes, let's."

"We can sit right here. Can you feel it with your right hand?" Kakeru asked, guiding me toward the seat.

I gently touched it, then sat down.

"Thank you. Whew, I'm tired."

"Remember to take it easy."

I thanked him over and over again.

Guiding me was becoming second nature to Kakeru. I'd never be able to fully express my gratitude.

Ahhh, I'm just happy to have him here with me. My heart feels so warm.

The two of us sat there in the night breeze. I could sense the silence surrounding us.

"Are you cold?" Kakeru asked.

"Huh?"

"I just noticed you were rubbing your hands together."

"I'm fine."

"Let me hold them."

Kakeru took my hands. The warmth from his palms spread through my fingertips.

"Mmmm. So warm."

"Don't say it like that. You're making it sound like I'm a hot drink."

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh," Kakeru said suddenly.

"What is it?"

"There are cherry trees behind us. The petals are dancing in the air."

"Are they pretty?"

"Yeah. Really pretty."

"I love cherry blossoms."

"They're really beautiful in spring, aren't they?"

"Not just spring; I love them in all the seasons," I told him.

I recalled what cherry blossoms looked like.

The trees behind us must have been in full bloom, their pink petals fluttering through the air every time there was a breeze. The two of us were sitting together on the bench, enveloped in the flurry of flowers.

A vision of a world for just the two of us popped into my head.

"How lovely," I murmured softly.

"Hold still," Kakeru said. "There's a cherry blossom petal on your head."

He gently brushed it off, as if giving me an affectionate pat.

The person I loved had stroked me on the head. I couldn't help but grin.

I feel like a little cat. Meow.

"You never stop smiling, do you?" Kakeru remarked.

"I mean, you come for a walk with me every evening. As a boyfriend, you get full marks."

"Huh? Oh, uh, um."

Kakeru was struggling to make any intelligible sounds. It made me happy hearing that shift in his tone.

I felt another gentle sea breeze and heard the trees rustling behind me.

This bench was just a short way along the walking path outside my apartment building.

A promenade on the coast of Tsukishima…

I'd walked down it once when I could still see, but that didn't mean I remembered the view.

I decided to ask Kakeru about it. With each and every thing Kakeru shared with me, my world grew bigger.

"Is that the sea in front of us?"

Before me flowed the Sumida River, which merged into the sea. It was a magnificent, wide river. Yeah—I could just picture it.

“You can see it?” Kakeru asked with mock surprise.

“How could I?”

I let out a laugh, and he sheepishly said, “It wasn’t that funny.”

“Can you tell me what you see, like you usually do?” I asked.

Kakeru started to lay out the scene for me without the slightest complaint.

The water was darker than the night sky, with no stars reflected in it. The only lights that shimmered on the surface were from the streetlights and apartment buildings, which swayed back and forth. The sight Kakeru described for me made me think of a tank of slowly drifting jellyfish I’d once seen at an aquarium.

“What’s the surface of the water like?”

“It’s swaying gently.”

“Gently swaying lights… It sort of reminds me of jellyfish.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” he said.

Sometimes, when I envisioned the places Kakeru told me about, it made me feel like we were in a world of our own. That feeling was hard to explain, but it made me really happy.

I was so glad I’d met him.

“Ready to move on?” he asked.

“Mmm. Just a bit longer,” I said, pulling him by the hand.

Kakeru held on tightly. It made me feel like he was embracing my entire body.

“Once I rest a little more, can we run again?”

“Huh? You want to give it another go?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“Fine. But after that, we’ll call it a night.”

Was it really possible to run with another person with your eyes shut?

If that person were anyone but Kakeru, I’d probably struggle.

He was a big part of the reason I felt safe when I ran.

“Hey, Kakeru.”

“Yeah?”

“Can I touch your face?”

“Huh? My face?”

He let out a cry of surprise.

Sorry for catching you off guard.

I just…

…want to touch you in some small way.

♪

“First, I want to say a few words,” came Yuuko’s voice.

“C’mon, do you really have to?” Narumi argued. “Just let us drink.”

The bustling restaurant was filled with the smell of Worcestershire sauce. I had been brought to everyone’s favorite *monja* pancake restaurant.

“We’re about to make a toast,” Kakeru said, handing me a tall glass.

My heart was beating fast. The mood around us made it feel like something funny was about to happen.

“Stop acting so embarrassed,” Yuuko teased.

“I’m not,” Narumi responded with a laugh.

“Okay, then.” After pausing for a moment, Yuuko took a deep breath to make sure we could all hear her. “Here’s to Narumi and his new job offer!”

“Cheers!”

The sound of glasses clinking rang out.

I joined in the chorus of “Cheers!” and held out my drink. Everyone clinked their glasses against mine.

“Congratulations!” Yuuko and Kakeru added, so I did the same.

All we were doing was clinking glasses and congratulating one another, but I was really enjoying myself nonetheless.

Congratulations!

Congratulations to everyone in the world!

That was the sort of mood I was in.

The hubbub of the restaurant continued, and there were sporadic bursts of thunderous laughter.

Who knew that drinking with friends could be this much fun?! I couldn’t contain my excitement.

“Now then, could we get a few words from the man of the hour, Narumi, who has triumphantly secured an offer from his top-choice company?” Yuuko said in a gruff voice.

“No idea what *that* was,” Narumi responded, sounding a bit embarrassed. I heard a chair being pulled out from where he was.

“Ahem, ahhh, ahhh, testing, testing.”

Narumi’s voice was coming from above me. He must have stood up.

The mic test bit was already making me laugh.

“There have been times when I came close to giving up and nights when I cried all alone. The only reason I’m standing here today is because—”

But just as Narumi was getting to the good part, Kakeru interrupted him.

“So, uh, when are we gonna get to eat these *monja*?”

“Aww, gimme a break!” Narumi groaned.

It was so funny, I ended up laughing until my stomach hurt.

“Damn, Fuyutsuki. You’re laughin’ way too hard.”

“S-sorry, sorry. Ah-ha-ha!”

I couldn’t see Narumi, but picturing the troubled look he must have on his face made me laugh even harder.

“Just be glad Koharu finds you so funny,” said Kakeru.

“Don’t laugh at him, Koharu,” Yuuko said sternly. “You’ll just inflate his ego.”

“What d’ya mean by that?”

“It doesn’t take much for you Kansai folk to start calling yourselves comedians.”

“Whoa, stereotype much?!”

“Do you think you’d be the straight man or the funny one?”

“Good question. I guess I tend to be the straight man.”

“See? You definitely had that answer lined up already.”

“What a cunning trap!”

In my head, during their comedic exchange, Yuuko was giving him a reproachful look while Narumi seemed taken aback. Narumi and Yuuko were the perfect pair, and reflecting on how good their relationship had always been brought me so much joy.

I tugged on Kakeru’s sleeve, asking him to give me an ear.

“Those two get along so well,” I whispered.

Kakeru’s response, however, took me by surprise.

“Yeah, but it’s a little complicated.”

Huh?

I wanted to ask why, but I didn’t get the chance.

“Three more minutes, then you guys can cut ’em up with your spatulas!” announced Narumi. “I feel like my *monja* power has really improved over the years.”

“What the heck is ‘*monja* power’?” quipped Kakeru.

“The ability to bring out the very best of a *monja*,” Narumi explained. “My *monja* power’s over forty-two hundred.”

“At least give us a baseline on that figure.”

“Well, you’re a two, Sorano.”

“A baseline, I said!”

By that point, my face was sore from smiling so much.

As soon as someone said something dumb, they’d become the focus of the conversation. And just when you thought things had gotten back on track, somebody else would play the fool. Our discussions kept twisting and turning in all sorts of funny directions.

“Come to think of it, do people from Kansai even eat *monja*?” I asked Narumi.

“Uh-oh, Koharu…,” came the voice beside me.

“I’m so glad you asked!”

For some reason, Narumi sounded pleased with himself. I waited eagerly for his response.

“My mom’s from Gunma, so I’m actually biracial—half Kansai, half Kanto!” he said proudly.

“Narumi can’t sit in front of a griddle without telling this story,” Kakeru added, sounding exasperated. “Humor him, Koharu.”

“What? You’re biracial because you’re from Kanto and Kansai?!”

I couldn’t help but react enthusiastically to Narumi’s unconventional way of thinking.

“So do you prefer your *okonomiyaki* Kansai- or Hiroshima-style?”

“Uhh… Neither of those options has anythin’ to do with Kanto. They’re both from the west.”

It seemed like I’d been the one to stall the conversation this time, because Narumi sounded dejected. I couldn’t see him, but the image of a sad puppy came to mind.

“Ah! Sorry.”

“Jeez,” groaned Yuuko. “It’s not her fault your anecdote is so boring.”

“How’s it boring?!” snapped Narumi. “That story brought the house down in my job interviews. I had the execs in stitches during the final round.”

“They were probably warned about it in their notes: ‘Proudly jokes about being Kansai-Kanto biracial, but it’s not funny.’ I’m sure they only burst out laughing because they couldn’t believe you’d actually said it.”

“Hayase… You’re bein’ pretty harsh today. I thought *I* was supposed to be the center of attention.”

“Excuse me! Another beer, please!”

“No way did you just ignore me!”

With that, they went right back to arguing like a pair of married comedians.

Just being with my friends filled me with joy.

I thought about how happy I was not to be in the hospital anymore.

“He’s right, Yuuko,” I said. “We’re here today to congratulate Narumi. You’re obligated to laugh at his stories.”

“‘Obligated’?!” repeated Kakeru. “You’re just as cruel as Yuuko!”

“Ah!” I exclaimed again. “I—I’m sorry.”

“We better start eating…,” Narumi said weakly.

“Here you go, Koharu.”

“Hm?”

“I put some *monja* on your plate. It’s right in front of you, along with your

chopsticks."

"Thank you."

I lifted my arm and found the corner of the table, which allowed me to feel my way around the top. I reached out in front of me and located my chopsticks and plate, then gently probed the middle of the dish, checking where the *monja* was. Finally, I took a big bite.

"This is the first time you've brought me here, but the food is really good!"

The sour sauce complemented the sweetness of the cabbage, and the sakura shrimp and squid inside the pancake were delicious. Some of the crispy ramen noodles on top were still crunchy, while others had softened, creating a nice contrast.

It was nothing like the *monja* my mom made at home; you could definitely tell it had been made in a restaurant. I was shocked. Who knew *monja* could be so tasty?!

"I'm glad you like it, Fuyutsuki!" Narumi said.

"It's amazing!"

I used to hate eating outside of my home.

I thought I'd be humiliated if I spilled something on myself in front of other people. But after getting to know Kakeru and everyone else, I felt like it was a waste not to join in.

Missing out on fun times like this just because I was embarrassed was the real waste!

With that, I focused on my special training.

"Would you prefer a spoon instead of chopsticks?" Kakeru asked quietly.

"Why do you ask?"

"I wondered if chopsticks made you more likely to spill."

"It's easier to eat with chopsticks," I insisted. "Unlike a spoon, they make me feel like I have a proper grip on the food."

I held my plate close to my mouth so I wouldn't spill on my clothes while I was eating.

"See? Don't worry about me. Oh, but could you get me another helping?"

"Sure."

"Are you eating as well, Kakeru?"

"Yeah, I'm eating heaps."

For some reason, I got the feeling he was lying.

Kakeru was sitting right beside me, and it had been a while since I'd sensed his hands moving.

I thought he'd probably been too busy worrying about me, which made me feel kind of guilty.

It was times like this that I needed to get it together. If I looked after myself, Kakeru wouldn't need to pay so much attention to me.

"You're going to work for a ferry company, right, Narumi?" I asked.

"Yup. It was my number one choice, so I can't tell ya how relieved I was. I really appreciate you guys plannin' this little get-together for me."

"It's no big deal," Kakeru said. "You don't have to get down on your hands and knees to thank us…"

"Wh-what? He's on his hands and knees?" I said, startled.

"Of course I'm not! Stop tryin' to trick Fuyutsuki!"

"Oh, Kakeru was kidding?!"

I puffed out my cheeks indignantly, which made Kakeru chuckle.

"Well, I'm still grateful to you guys," Narumi said brightly. "I'll hafta organize a party when you two get job offers, Hayase and Sorano."

"When I do, I want *yakiniku*," replied Yuuko.

"I'll go with sushi, then," responded Kakeru.

"…What's wrong with *monja*?" Narumi asked, sounding dejected.

Oh no. I'm going to burst out laughing again.

"Then when I get a job, let's go out for tempura!" I chimed in.

Even though I said that, I was under no illusions finding work would be easy for me. I liked the idea of being independent—of living by myself and earning my own money—but I knew it wouldn't be so simple. I'd need people to show a lot of understanding, and there would be many hurdles to overcome.

Despite my qualms, Narumi immediately snapped back with, "*Seriously*, what's wrong with *monja*?!"

My heart felt so…warm.

It was so nice just to be included. Something like that couldn't be summed up with a simple "thank you."

"Now we're on the subject, how's it goin', Sorano?" asked Narumi.

"What do you mean?" Kakeru replied.

"I mean, you're a fourth-year, but you're still on campus every single day. I figured you desperately needed the extra credits."

"I have nearly all the credits I need. I'm basically just keeping Koharu company."

"You're bein' overprotective."

"You're right! He is overprotective!" I joined in.

It was true. Kakeru was so preoccupied with me, he ended up neglecting himself. I was a little worried about that.

"You think…?"

"What about job hunting? It doesn't sound like you're lookin' very hard."

“Well…I don’t even know what kind of place I want to work at. What about you, Hayase?”

“I applied to loads of different start-ups,” Yuuko said. “I’ve made it through to the final round of interviews with a few companies, but I’ll decide which to go with later.”

“Impressive… I’d expect nothing less from you, Hayase,” Kakeru said, sounding amazed.

Yuuko always did take the bull by the horns.

Just as I was about to criticize Kakeru for deflecting the question, Yuuko spoke up.

“What will you do when Sorano finds a job, Koharu?”

I froze for a moment. I couldn’t figure out what Yuuko was hinting at.

Kakeru was lost for words, apparently just as startled as me.

The cacophony of voices inside the restaurant suddenly grew louder.

“What do you mean?” Kakeru eventually said. “Koharu still has college.”

“Why can’t you just admit that marriage and living together is on the cards?” chastised Yuuko. “Right, Koharu?”

Oh. So that’s what she meant.

It finally clicked.

Marriage. Living together. Those words—which had never even crossed my mind before—made my heart skip a beat. I was happy just to get to be with Kakeru in the present. If our relationship moved on to the next stage, what might the future hold?

Ahhh. Yuuko must’ve had too much to drink.

“Honestly, Yuuko. Are you drunk?” I asked.

“Yeah, Hayase. That’s just a nuisance.”

“Huh? Am I a nuisance, Kakeru?”

If he was talking about me, I’d be shook.

“That’s not what I meant. I’m saying Hayase’s being a nuisance sticking her nose in. Not you, Koharu.”

Phew, that was a relief. Or was it? Now I felt sorry for Yuuko. Being called a nuisance seemed to bother her more than I’d expected.

“A nuisance… I guess I am just a nuisance…,” Yuuko muttered, before ordering another beer.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Yuuko?”

“You’re actin’ like you’ve just been dumped,” Narumi said quietly.

At that moment, Yuuko let out a wail.

“Your messages can’t be too blunt, and you can’t send them too often… What the heck are you *supposed* to do?!”

Yuuko began to sob.

Since I couldn't see, I didn't fully understand what was going on and looked around restlessly.

"It's okay," Kakeru reassured me.

"Dating is so hard…," I heard Yuuko say.

I didn't know why, but her words really stuck with me.

From then on, our get-together to celebrate Narumi's job offer became a consolation party for Yuuko.

♪

As May gave way to June, the evening breeze seemed to get warmer.

Stepping onto the university lawn, I felt the grass beneath my shoes. The smell of fresh greenery really made it feel like early summer.

Holding onto my right elbow, Kakeru described the sunset to me.

The twilit sky was covered in a deep shade of blue, gradually growing darker.

The gradient of navy blue and crimson sounded beautiful.

When Kakeru related these sights to me, it expanded my world even further.

Just then, I heard Yuuko's booming voice coming from straight in front of me, amplified by a microphone.

"Now, it's time to wrap up this year's college festival with our customary fireworks show! The final fireworks in the display were thought up by children, so keep watching until the end!"

That's right. It was the day of the college festival.

The Children's Fireworks event that we'd started three years earlier as first-year students had become a staple of the festival.

A total of ninety fireworks—eighty normal ones and ten based on the illustrations the children had drawn—were launched from the university dock. The event lasted fifteen minutes, including the descriptions of all the drawings, and always drew large crowds.

There was a lively atmosphere on the lawn. I could hear footsteps and people laughing, which must have been coming from the food stalls. The smell of sauce and grilled meat wafted through the air.

I'd never imagined it would become such a popular event. It really did feel like a proper college festival.

"Okay, should we go see Kotomugi?"

Kakeru grabbed hold of my hand, and we headed for the dock together.

"Hey, Kotomugi!" I heard him call out.

Kotomugi, the president of the Fireworks Research Society, had repeated a year before moving on to graduate school. This meant he was still a student, despite being older than us.

According to Kakeru, it had been Kotomugi who'd helped make the Children's Fireworks event an annual tradition. It went to show how deep his connections ran with the fireworks companies.

The Children's Fireworks project had originally been created to launch drawings made by hospitalized children into the sky. On that day three years earlier, Kakeru and the others had set off those precious fireworks to try to raise my spirits.

"Hey, Sorano!" somebody called out in a laid-back voice.

It was Kotomugi.

"Now seems like a good time to start setting them off," Kakeru said.

"Got it. Then let's get started."

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Kotomugi shouted, "Fire away!" in a few different directions.

With a soft *whomp*, the first shell rose into the sky. A few seconds later, a loud *boom* rang out.

Cheers erupted on the lawn, and the scent of gunpowder filled the air.

The fireworks had begun.

Boom, boom, boom! The fireworks exploded one after the next.

What color are they?

What shape are they?

It made me excited to think about.

"Koharu?"

"What's up?"

"It's just…you look like you're having a lot of fun."

What kind of face was I making? I started to feel embarrassed.

"Did you launch fireworks like this every year, even when I was in the hospital?"

"Yeah. We kept up the volunteer program, too, passing on our responsibilities to the next group of students."

"That kind of makes me really happy."

"It does? How come?"

"I'm just happy that, even while I was away, the university stayed as exciting and full of energy. I'm so glad to be back. I can't help but look forward to every day."

A particularly loud *boom* echoed through the air, sending a tremor all the way through my body. The cheers from the crowd intensified, going from "Ooh!" to "Woooo!"

“Kakeru—”

Please.

“—hold my hand.”

“Okay,” he replied gently, grasping the tip of my right hand.

Kakeru’s warm fingers intertwined with mine, and his body heat slowly spread to my palm.

The warmth of his body made me feel at ease.

“Hey, Kakeru.”

“Yeah?”

“Will you describe the fireworks for me?”

“Sure.”

Again, that gentle voice.

“A yellow firework just exploded in a perfect circle.”

“A Brocade Chrysanthemum firework? Oh, and I heard a series of quick bangs—were those multi-shot aerials?”

“Kotomugi’s really made an impact on you, too, huh?”

“He talks about fireworks so much, you can’t help picking up a few things.”

We both laughed—but then the sound of fireworks came to an abrupt halt.

A lukewarm sea breeze blew toward us from the port, the faint smell of salt melding with the strong scent of gunpowder.

“Is it over already?” I asked.

“No. The fireworks the children designed are next.”

Listening carefully, I heard Yuuko’s voice. She was explaining the wishes the children had expressed through their fireworks.

A moment later, I heard the soft whooshing sound of a firework being launched. It burst with a *bang*, followed by applause.

It was a shaped firework—the kind that paints pictures in the night sky.

What shape was that one?

Maybe a smiley face? Or a heart?

Kakeru spoke to me in a whisper, his hot breath lingering in my ear.

“These kids have been battling their illnesses for a long time. This might not be able to erase all their hardships, but I hope it sparks a light in their hearts.”

His words really resonated with me.

If it wasn’t for that first fireworks show, I wouldn’t have been here today. I couldn’t thank everyone enough for making that hope-filled event a cherished annual tradition.

“And now, our final firework is by Kakeru Sorano,” Yuuko announced. “He made this firework for his girlfriend, who put up such a brave fight

against her illness."

"*Oooh!*" Kotomugi jeered, making fun of Kakeru.

"Wait, you made this firework?" I asked.

"I packed the shell."

By that, Kakeru presumably meant he'd been the one to pack the firework shell with gunpowder.

What?! He really did that?!

"They let you make the firework?"

"Yeah. It was really tough. I had to wear overalls, and my arms got sore from pasting all the kraft paper."

"I can't believe you did all that for me."

"It's to celebrate your return to college."

Fwoosh. The firework flew up into the sky and burst with a *bang*.

"What kind of firework is it?" I asked.

"It's a deep red one called a Crimson Red."

"I'm sure it's beautiful."

"Firework colors have all sorts of meanings to them, you see."

"They do?"

"Deep red symbolizes 'forming a connection.'"

As he said that, Kakeru squeezed my hand a little tighter.

He must have been talking about his connection to me. I hoped so anyway.

How can I ever repay him for how loved he's made me feel? He even made a firework for me.

It was no exaggeration to say that Kakeru was the reason I was still holding onto life.

He'd given me a miracle. How could you return a favor like that?

Thinking about it made me feel guilty. I was just an ordinary person, incapable of miracles. Not only would I not be able to repay his kindness, I would continue to take advantage of it and rely on him.

"Ugh."

I was stuck.

"What's the matter?"

"Huh?"

"I just heard you let out a groan," Kakeru said.

I brushed it off by insisting it was nothing, then smiled at him.

Apparently, my illness was almost impossible to fully cure. According to the doctor, it was the sort of thing where you tried to extend your life for as long as possible and make the most of the time you had left.

The clock was ticking for me—so I needed to repay Kakeru while I still could.

Would it be enough to keep saying “thank you” to him?

Or if I told him “I love you” over and over again?

No. I wanted to do more than just verbalize my appreciation.

This is so difficult…

What if I had been blessed with this miracle so I could find a way to repay him? Maybe that was my life’s purpose.

“I wish I could stay here forever,” Kakeru muttered absently.

I’d just been thinking the exact same thing.

I felt so happy. Warmth flooded my cheeks, and I looked down, embarrassed that I might be blushing.

Unable to say a word, I just gave Kakeru’s hand a squeeze.

2. Ring Size

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♪

In July, Kakeru started to get serious about finding a job.

Actually, that might be giving him too much credit. Unable to tolerate his apathy any longer, Yuuko had started dragging him to job fairs, which eventually forced him to get his act together.

I laughed when she told me that.

“Ha-ha. I hope he puts some effort in.”

“It’s no laughing matter,” Yuuko moaned in exasperation.

Kakeru had begun to show up on campus less frequently. He’d been helping me around as often as he could since I returned to college, so we’d been together every day. I was a little sad I hadn’t seen him much recently.

That wasn’t to say that I couldn’t get around campus by myself.

By now, I knew the place inside and out. Whether it was the shortcut to my next lecture or the precise locations of any steps, I could get myself from point A to point B at an impressive speed. I could buy milk tea from the vending machine or enjoy my recent obsession of basking in the sunshine on a bench on the lawn.

“Morning, Fuyutsuki,” I heard a classmate say.

It was Ayakawa, a fellow student who occasionally came to speak to me. Her voice always sounded strong and determined.

“Good morning,” I replied.

“They’ve changed the lecture room for the next class,” Ayakawa told me.

“Oh, really?”

Changes to the room or schedule for lectures were difficult for me. Announcements were usually posted on the student bulletin board, but I couldn’t read them. Some kind professors sent out an e-mail the day before, but that depended on the thoughtfulness of the individual. Not every professor gave us prior notice.

One time, I’d walked into a silent lecture room and thought, *Hmmm, it’s pretty quiet in here… Wait, it’s completely empty? Not even the professor’s here?* All I could do was laugh it off, but that didn’t stop me from feeling a little sad. That was why I was so grateful for people like Ayakawa, who made

the effort to warn me about the changes.

"Do you want to walk with me?" she offered.

"Absolutely. Thank you so much."

"Need an arm or anything?"

"No, I'm okay. I can walk pretty quickly on my own."

I set off, feeling around on the ground with my white cane. The sunlight felt pleasant on my skin.

"Hey, Fuyutsuki," Ayakawa said.

"Yeah?"

"Random question, but how old are you?"

Since I'd been on a leave of absence, I was older than my other classmates. Now that I thought about it, I'd never gotten the chance to tell people how many years I'd taken off, so my age must have been a bit of a mystery.

"Believe it or not, I just turned twenty-two."

"You definitely give off an older-sister vibe, so that doesn't surprise me."

"Wait, do I really?"

"Well, you're always walking around with your upperclassman boyfriend —wait, *is* he your boyfriend?"

"He is, yeah. That makes me really shy to admit, though."

"Look at you, acting all lovestruck!" said Ayakawa, laughing. "I know this is a little weird to say to your face, but I didn't expect you to be so easy to talk to, Fuyutsuki."

"Wait, do I seem unapproachable or something?" I asked.

"It's probably more of an us problem, to be honest. I hope that doesn't sound rude."

"Well, feel free to come chat with me anytime," I said with a smile.

Ayakawa smiled, too. I couldn't see her face or how she was smiling, but I was sure she was a lovely person. I pictured her having a slightly tomboyish vibe.

"Can I ask you one more thing?" she asked hesitantly.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Is it true you can't read the bulletin board?"

"Yeah. Unfortunately, I can't read printed text. I really wish I had psychic powers so I knew what it said."

"I never knew you were such a joker," Ayakawa said, laughter in her voice. "If it's all right with you, could we swap numbers? That way, if anything gets posted on the bulletin board, I can let you know. Wait, can you use a phone?"

"Heh-heh. I'm such a pro, I can even use it with my eyes closed," I said

proudly. “Oh, the part about using a phone with my eyes closed was a joke, obviously. I *can* use a smartphone, though.”

Ayakawa laughed, walking by my side.

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re a funny sort of person, aren’t you, Fuyutsuki?”

“What do you mean by that?!”

I’d found somebody who was kind to me besides Kakeru. That made me really happy.

I could do most things on my own, but plenty of people still supported me and offered a helping hand.

I accepted their kindness into my life.

That was how I lived.

Sometimes, I feel a little guilty about it. But I thought it was a lot nicer to express my gratitude than to dwell on my guilt.

“Thank you so much, Ayakawa.”

“It’s no problem at all.”

Her response made my heart swell with happiness.

Just then, I heard a man’s voice.

“Oh, Angel of the Terrace! You’re not with your boyfriend today?”

“Fuyutsuki, some guy’s calling you an angel? What’s that about?” Ayakawa asked.

I automatically covered my face with my hands.

“That’s what *I* want to know!”

I really wished they’d stop calling me that…

♪

“Koharu! I’ll leave your clothes here.”

Kakeru was arriving soon, so Mom had brought me some sports clothes.

He came to my apartment building every evening so we could take a walk together.

I always got changed before heading out, so every time, Mom brought my clothes to my room.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“No need to thank me. Take care out there.”

Her cheerful voice filled the room. Mom always sounded happy when Kakeru was coming over. She must have liked him, too.

I reached for the sportswear that was laid out on my bed. Mom had put it in a spot that was easy for me to grab. The clothes were neatly folded and gave off the fresh scent of fabric softener.

When I thought about it, I realized I'd never done laundry before. Mom did it for me every single day.

It wasn't just my laundry she did, either; she took care of everything for me—cooking, dishes, cleaning the house, running me a bath…

The thought made me feel a little sad. There was so much I simply couldn't do.

Ding-dong.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Sorano's here!" Mom called out.

She sounded so happy.

"Coming!"

The night air was cool, but walking made me break out in a light sweat.

The cicadas weren't chirping yet, but I could hear other insects in the distance. A warm sea breeze—the kind you get across Tokyo Bay at night—blew gently through the air. The cherry trees were lush and green, or so Kakeru told me.

He had started working part-time at the same restaurant as Narumi and told me Yuuko had stopped by the night before.

"How late did Yuuko stay?" I asked.

"Until closing at eleven. She was drinking with some other customers."

"Were they people she knew?"

"Nope, total strangers. Drunk Hayase kept yelling that they'd just met, and I didn't know how to respond."

"Oh no…"

The place where he worked was a café during the day and a bar at night, meaning it served alcohol.

According to Kakeru, Yuuko plus alcohol usually equaled trouble—but he didn't seem annoyed by her at all. In fact, he sounded almost amused. That was Kakeru for you.

"She took a taxi with Narumi from Tokyo Station to Kiyosumi Shirakawa, then meandered back to the dorm."

"You must be tired, too, Kakeru."

"That girl… She's gonna find herself in trouble drinking one of these days."

"When that happens, make sure to help her out."

"Well, I definitely will if I'm around."

It was a kind thing to say.

Weirdly happy, I found myself clinging to Kakeru's arm.

I caught a whiff of his scent from his shoulder. The smell of his sweat was

different from mine. I really liked it.

"Um, Koharu? Isn't it hard to walk like this?"

"So you'll help Yuuko, but you won't help me?"

"Huh? Is something the matter?"

"Come on, guide me properly."

"What are you talking about?" Kakeru said, laughing—but he still did as I asked, pointing out a patch of grass.

The promenade we always walked along in Tsukishima smelled faintly of the sea, with the scent of grass mixed in. That smell of greenery had grown stronger since summer began.

To me, summer was the season when you could feel the vitality of life. It felt like strength was swelling inside me, too.

"Can you see the stars tonight?" I asked.

"Hmm, not really."

Kakeru started to describe the scene to me.

The Summer Triangle wasn't visible in the sky. Every so often, an airplane would blink red, which he said looked like a shooting star slowly drifting by. I pictured it all in my mind.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, Kakeru shouted, "I wish Hayase's drinking habits would improve!"

"They're not *real* shooting stars," I retorted.

"Thanks for not letting my joke fall flat," Kakeru said with a chuckle.

I loved it when we bantered back and forth like this. It made me so happy.

"Tomorrow's our first date in a while. Where do you want to go?" I asked.

"Is Ginza okay?"

"Of course."

"I'll pick you up in the morning, then."

"Thank you."

Oh, but…

A wave of concern suddenly hit me.

"Is it okay for you to spend your day off going on a date?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I just thought you'd be busy job hunting or something…"

"You don't need to worry about that. I'm doing everything I'm supposed to and making steady progress with interviews."

"Is it going well?"

"Honestly, it feels like three steps forward, two steps back. I'm on the right track, though."

"You've got this!"

"Anyway, they say job hunting is a test of stamina, so we should both

work on our fitness."

"Then let's go for a short run," I suggested, and we set out at a light jog.

Since spring, we'd been alternating between spurts of jogging and walking, and over time, the distance I could keep running had increased. Kakeru said it was now up to about two hundred meters.

"I'm sor—"

The sound of a horn from a distant highway interrupted us for a moment, drowning out Kakeru's voice. But for some reason, I could tell he was apologizing.

"What for?" I asked.

"It's just… I've been so busy with work and job hunting, we've hardly been able to see each other."

"That's okay. You always text me before you go to bed."

"But you're already asleep by then."

"Well, yeah. I go to bed at ten. But it makes me happy to wake up and see a message from you."

"Thanks," Kakeru replied shyly. "How's college going?"

"It's fine. Everyone helps me out."

"*Everyone*? Not guys, I hope."

"You're not jealous, are you?!"

I moved a little closer to Kakeru.

"I'm not…*not* jealous."

"Well, which is it?"

It kind of made me happy that Kakeru was jealous over me. I couldn't help but smile.

"Anyway, you've certainly been putting in a lot of hours at your part-time job. What are you *really* planning?"

"There's no secret plan. I just know I'm going to need some cash."

"Will you, now?"

"You're doubting your boyfriend?"

"Hmph."

I puffed out my cheeks. It was the most intimidating "I'm going to get mad if you don't tell me the truth" face I could make.

But it was all in vain.

"You're sooo cute. Can I take a picture?" Kakeru said, making fun of me.

♪

The next day, Kakeru came to pick me up, and we went on a date in Ginza.

“Two more steps to go.”

He guided me up the stairs at Ginza Station like he’d done it a hundred times. But the first thing he said after we got out to street level surprised me.

“Uh… Does Ginza have some kind of dress code?”

“Huh? What’s going on? Where did that come from?” I asked.

“I mean, there are fancy-looking people all over the place. There’s a woman with a knit sweater draped over her shoulders, an older lady in a kimono, and a smartly dressed man in a suit who looks like he’s walked straight off the streets of Italy. It’s like they all stepped out of a fashion magazine. Everyone’s so stylish—*desperately* stylish. They’re style monsters!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You have nothing to worry about, Koharu. The outfit your mom picked out today looks great on you.”

“For your information, Kakeru, even *I* spend a lot of time deciding what to wear. My mom just describes the color and texture of the fabric to me. It takes me forever to find an outfit you’ll think looks cute.”

“Oh, uh, right. I didn’t mean it like that. I figured you must, of course…”

Kakeru was struggling to get the words out, which was adorable. I took pity on him and decided to help him out.

“I look good in this outfit?”

“Of course. You look cute…”

“Thank you.”

I gave Kakeru’s left arm a tight squeeze and cuddled up to him. I didn’t know why, but I wanted to stay close to Kakeru and touch him as much as I could. I couldn’t help it.

I wanted to stay with him, to be one with him, to cling to him. Was this what it felt like to be in love? It seemed like a level above that, this feeling of wishing we could fuse together.

“There are tons of people around, so this is a little embarrassing,” Kakeru said.

“Don’t worry. I can’t see them,” I told him.

“Hey, that’s a sneaky thing to say.”

“You’ll have to deal with it. I’ll let you go as long as you give me a hug when you drop me off outside my apartment.”

“But then your mom’s going to see us. That would be awkward…”

“Aw, you’re so shy,” I said, letting go of him.

“We can still hold hands,” Kakeru offered, so I intertwined my fingers in his. Holding hands with Kakeru made it feel like we were one.

Kakeru explained that Ginza was pedestrian only that day.

“Pedestrian only? Does that mean we’re in the middle of the road?”

“You sound excited.”

“It’s just so freeing.”

There was something invigorating in the air. The sun was bright, casting a strong glare off the concrete.

In my mind, I was walking right down the middle of Ginza’s main street. Buildings flanked me on both sides, and pedestrians were everywhere as I strode along a road usually reserved for cars. I couldn’t tell whether it felt liberating or like I was doing something outrageous. No, *liberating* was definitely the right word.

Either way, just walking down the street like this felt amazing.

“You know…this feeling of freedom kind of reminds me of home,” Kakeru said.

“Are there pedestrian-only areas like this in Shimonoseki?”

“No, not exactly.”

Apparently, the general atmosphere of Ginza’s “pedestrian paradise” reminded Kakeru of the freedom of walking near the Kanmon Straits.

“I’d love to take a walk there someday.”

“Why don’t we take a trip to Shimonoseki once all this job-hunting stuff settles down?”

“Oh? Really?”

“Sure. You might have to meet my mom while we’re there, though.”

“I’d love nothing more!”

“In that case, I better put everything I’ve got into looking for a job.”

“You can do it!”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I heard a woman’s voice.

“Um, excuse me.”

It was only when I heard Kakeru say, “Uh, yes?” that I realized she was talking to us.

“So I’m actually…”

Kakeru listened to what the woman had to say. It turned out she was a reporter for a free paper that was exclusive to Ginza. She was taking pictures of the street and asked us if we would be in them.

“What do you think, Koharu?” Kakeru asked.

“I’m a little shy, but I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you,” I heard the reporter say. “Now, why don’t we have you stand somewhere over there?” she said, guiding me into position.

I assumed I’d be taking a photo with Kakeru, but the reporter turned him away with a gentle “I think we can do without the boyfriend.”

That meant it was going to be just me.

A wave of embarrassment suddenly hit me, making me want to cover my face.

"I'll hold your cane," Kakeru said, before disappearing somewhere.

"Okay, miss, could you pose for us?" came a deep male voice. It wasn't the female reporter talking anymore. She must have had a cameraman with her.

A pose?

I was so embarrassed my face felt like it was going to catch fire.

Casting my inhibitions aside, I struck the best pose I could manage.

I placed a hand on my hip, stuck one leg out at an angle, and pointed my toes upward.

"Koharu… That pose…is so old-fashioned."

Kakeru was laughing at me.

"Huh? Wait, what?"

It was a pose I used to always see J-pop idols doing on TV.

"You don't have to laugh about it," I said, on the verge of tears.

Then…

"Koharu?"

Kakeru touched my shoulder and spoke to me in a soft voice.

"I'm sorry for laughing. You're right. It's just not a pose you see in fashion magazines anymore."

He'd immediately sensed what was making me upset.

I wasn't sure why, but that made me unbearably happy.

He really understood me. He was so incredible. So kind.

"You can just stand up straight. You look cute, so there's no need to worry," Kakeru said, gently stroking my hair.

He was patting me on the head *and* calling me cute. My cheeks immediately started to burn.

I must be bright red!

But I can't do anything about that now!

With that in mind, I focused my attention back on the photo shoot.

While I was having my picture taken, I overheard Kakeru chatting with the female reporter.

"She's really cute, isn't she?" the woman said.

"More than just cute," replied Kakeru. "She has the best personality."

What…? Seriously? He sounded so proud. What had happened to the guy who'd told me to let go because he was embarrassed? Now *he* was being more embarrassing than *me*!

"She's blind?" the female reporter asked.

"Yes," replied Kakeru.

“Ah…”

“She might not be able to see, but she still puts a lot of effort into how she dresses. She’s just like any other girl.”

His words made me feel unbelievably shy.

“Are you married?” the woman suddenly asked.

It almost made me burst out laughing.

“Huh? No, not yet! We’re still in college!”

“Oh, I see. You just seem so natural together.”

“Well, we’ve been dating for a long time.”

“You sound proud about that.”

“Well, of course I am!”

Kakeru sounded way too proud. It was so unbelievably embarrassing, but in a way, it also showed just how much he cared about me.

Once the photo shoot was over, we carried on with our date. But as we were walking, Kakeru suddenly came to a stop.

“Hey, you know what?” he said.

“What?”

“We’ve been dating for over two years, but we haven’t bought ourselves matching rings.”

“Oh? Are you going to buy them for us?”

“Don’t get too ahead of yourself. Hold your horses, Koharu.”

I could hear him laughing.

“I’ll probably end up buying them someday, though. So could you get your ring size measured?”

What? Oh my gosh!

How could I not be happy about that?

“Of course!”

From there, we headed to what seemed to be a jewelry store. The air was filled with a sweet, perfume-like scent, and a woman who spoke in a soothing, concierge-like tone of voice agreed to measure my finger.

The attendant sounded extremely kind.

“Which finger would you like me to measure?” she asked.

“The ring finger,” replied Kakeru.

“Right hand or left?”

“D-did you just say the left?” I blurted out. My voice cracked, making the concierge and Kakeru both laugh.

“Um, I mean, the right, please…”

Hiding my face, I held out my right hand. I felt something cool slide along my finger a few times.

“Looks like you’re a size six,” she said.

I wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but apparently, it was on the smaller side.

“Would she be the same size on both hands?” Kakeru asked.

“It’s different for a lot of people,” the woman explained. “Let me just borrow your left hand for a moment.”

The concierge took my left hand and placed a ring on my finger.

“They appear to be the same size.”

“I wonder what size I am,” Kakeru said, before getting his measured, too.

Once we both knew our ring sizes, the lady asked, “Would you like me to bring out a few rings for you to have a look at?”

“Could we see some matching rings for couples?” Kakeru requested.

The attendant allowed us to try a few on.

“Oh, is this one bumpy because it has gems in it?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s set with melee diamonds,” she explained.

I held up my right hand with the ring on my finger.

“I’m sure it’s beautiful. Should we get this one?”

I made a brash attempt to get Kakeru to spoil me, but…

“Slow down there. We’re just here to get measured.”

He thwarted my plans.

“Aww…”

“When the time comes, I’ll buy you a ring with a ten-carat diamond,” he added, sounding as if he were placating a child.

“And when will that be?” I asked.

“In about a hundred years?” he joked.

“Then I’ll live until I’m a hundred and twenty-two!”

I’d ended up declaring just how long I would live right then and there in the jewelry shop.

After that, we left the store and started looking for somewhere to have lunch. Kakeru spotted a bakery with a terrace, where we were shown to a table right at the edge.

Kakeru explained that the terrace was on the fourth floor, facing out on a group of low buildings. The tables were round, and there weren’t many other customers.

“You’re really good at escorting me around, Kakeru,” I said.

“What are you pouting for?”

“I was just wondering where you learned how to do it.”

“Ah, so that’s what you were thinking,” he mused.

“Why do you sound so pleased with yourself?”

“It’s just cute that you’re a little jealous.”

“Of course I am… Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You’re so cute.”

My face instantly started to burn. I really wished he wouldn’t embarrass me like that in public.

“I said this earlier…but could you not do that when we’re out?”

“I wouldn’t do it with anyone but you.”

“Really?”

“Do I look like I would?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I can’t see.”

“Ha-ha.”

A person who wasn’t used to spending time with someone like me wouldn’t laugh at such a joke. I just wanted to make people laugh, so it made me feel guilty when they tried to be considerate.

But Kakeru had responded in the right way. He’d laughed out loud.

I found it reassuring when he laughed at my silly jokes. It made me feel accepted.

“Can you lend me your ear for a moment?”

“Sure. It’s all yours.”

I felt around for Kakeru’s ear. When I found it, I whispered to him:

“I love you.”

“Oh, yeah… Me too.”

He sounded so shy that even my cheeks started to burn.

Next, we both chose what we wanted to eat. Kakeru read out the entire menu from top to bottom. I settled on an egg salad sandwich, while he went for the carnivorous option—a steak sandwich.

When we were ordering, Kakeru asked the waiter if they could cut my egg salad sandwich into bite-sized pieces, casually displaying, once again, just how kind he was. By now, he’d definitely earned his black belt in thoughtfulness.

All of a sudden, I heard a baby start to cry behind me. It must have caught Kakeru’s attention, too, because he explained the situation to me.

“There’s a couple rocking their baby in a stroller.”

Kakeru added that he thought they were probably husband and wife, rather than just a couple dating, but they didn’t look it because they were so young.

“The sound doesn’t echo as much, and it’s more relaxing out here on the terrace,” he said.

“I’m glad the baby’s full of energy.”

“That couple can’t be much older than us.”

“They must have gotten married pretty early.”

I was just thinking how nice it was that the baby could cry so freely when

Kakeru interrupted my train of thought.

"That reminds me, when you were doing that photo shoot, the reporter asked me if we were married."

Caught off guard, I let out a strange voice. "Huh, r-really?"

"Yeah, I was surprised, too," Kakeru replied, his voice sounding higher than normal. "Koharu, how do you feel about getting married early?"

When I heard that question, everything started to make sense.

Going to Shimonoseki after Kakeru was done looking for jobs, the rings—all the dots started to connect and alarm bells went off. I could have been wrong…but it seemed like Kakeru had marriage on his mind.

No way… That makes me so happy.

That was my honest reaction—but as soon as that wave of joy hit me, a flood of other thoughts came rushing in.

There were still so many things I couldn't do.

I got other people to help me at college, and I constantly relied on Mom and even Kakeru.

I realized I needed to stand on my own two feet first.

It probably wouldn't be healthy to keep depending on him.

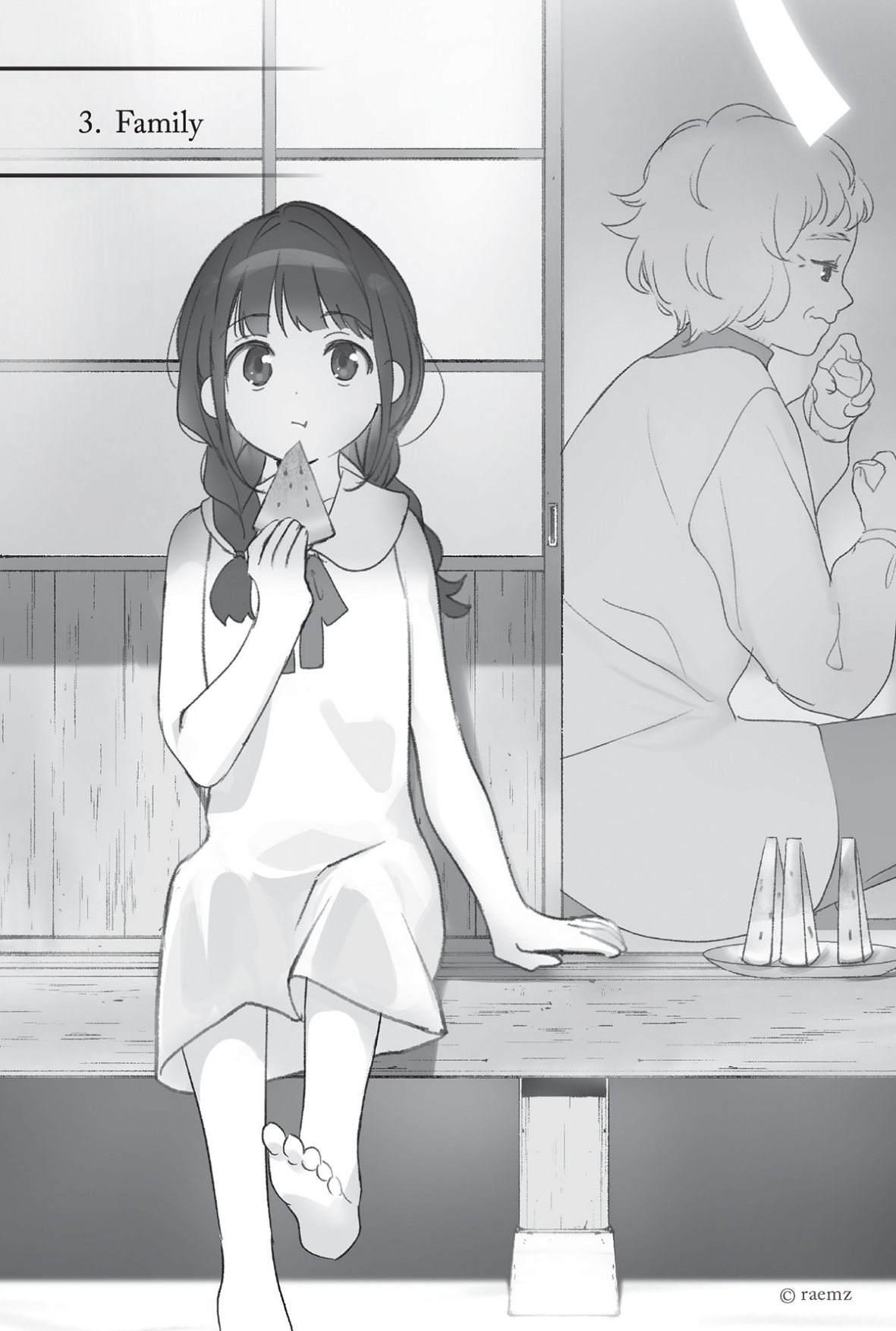
Yeah. There's still so much I need to do.

So I gave Kakeru my answer.

"Well…you're graduating college this year, but I still have three years left." I forced a smile. "I need to graduate properly first."

I'd dodged the question.

3. Family



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When summer vacation came around, I asked Mom if I could help out with the housework more.

"Sure," she responded excitedly. "It'll be good practice for married life."

Once I got started, though, I realized I had a lot to learn even for something as simple as doing laundry.

I had to memorize a long list of things—the location of the buttons, where the detergent went, how much to put in—before I could even operate the machine.

"For things that can go in the dryer, you should use the wash/dry mode. Clothes that can't need to be washed on delicate, then hung up to dry," Mom explained.

"Touch this."

"Okay."

"This can go in the dryer."

"Okay."

"Next, this one."

"Okay."

"This one goes with the delicates," she said, showing me the difference in texture.

Just as I was stressing over how much I had to learn, Mom said something that reassured me a little.

"Well, as long as the stuff gets washed, it doesn't matter if you make a few mistakes. One cap's worth of detergent is normally plenty. There's no exact science to it," she added with a laugh.

After the laundry, I set about cleaning the floor with a sweeper mop.

"Koharu."

"Yes?"

"Why don't you cook a meal for Sorano the next time he comes over?"

"Huh? Would that be okay?"

"It's good to have something to work toward."

Mom put her arm around my shoulders.

“Yay!”

“What kind of food does he like?”

“He loves curry.”

“Ha-ha. I can imagine that,” Mom said, patting me on the back. “Okay. Let’s practice.”

Thus began my intensive training.

I pressed the button at the top right to turn on the washing machine. The second button from the top—to the left of the power button—was for the wash/dry mode. The compartment in the middle was for laundry detergent, and the one to the right was for fabric softener. For now, I could just fill the cap of each bottle. I stuck my finger into the laundry detergent cap to check how much was inside.

“Mom, the laundry’s ready to go!”

“Okay, be right there!”

Mom came over.

“Let’s have a look,” she said.

“Please give it a thorough inspection!”

That day, I’d given myself the challenge of doing the laundry on my own. Well, it was a front-loading washer-dryer, so it did everything for you at the press of a button—but I still had to put my underwear in a mesh bag, separate my clothes, figure out which buttons to press, and how much detergent to add. There were a lot of steps.

“The detergent’s fine, and there’s nothing in there that shouldn’t go in the dryer. Perfect. You did it, Koharu!” Mom said, clutching my hand.

“That’s a relief. This washing machine is now *my* washing machine,” I declared.

“What do you mean *your* washing machine?”

There was laughter in her voice.

“I can even use it with my eyes closed!”

“That’s incredible! Who knew you were so talented?!”

“Maybe I’ll master washing dishes next.”

“We should probably go to the kitchen, then. Can I ask you to wash up?”

“I want to get better at doing things on my own so I can try living by myself someday,” I explained.

“I’ll always be around, so there’s no need to worry.”

Mom chuckled softly.

Learning how to do new things was a lot of fun.

♪

“Mom and I made hamburgers today. Do you want to stay for dinner?”

“Huh? I can’t do that to you.”

“It’s fine. I thought you might join us, so we made enough for three.”

“Really? In that case, I guess I’ll take you up on your offer after our walk.”

“Mom! Kakeru’s going to eat with us!” I shouted in the direction of the living room.

“Okay!” came her response.

That evening, before we left on our walk, Kakeru and I both covered ourselves in bug spray. It was a summer night, so the mosquitos would eat us alive if we weren’t careful. The thick shrubberies along the Sumida River promenade, in particular, were swarming with them.

Kakeru gave me a few sprays of bug repellant, and I used my palms to spread it out.

“Oh, by the way, how’d your tests go today?” Kakeru asked.

“All clear. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Really?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“You’ve lied to me before.”

“Give me a break,” I protested, indignantly puffing out my cheeks.

Although I’d beaten my cancer, I still had to undergo some tests every six months to make sure it hadn’t resurfaced or spread to a different part of my body.

I would be lying if I said I didn’t fear the worst. My cancer had returned before. The idea of having to go back into the hospital left me feeling depressed.

But…

Even so…

Feeling bad wouldn’t get me anywhere. Anyone could fall seriously ill at any time, and you never knew when you might end up in an accident.

At the end of the day, I just had to live life to the fullest.

I wouldn’t let myself be beaten again. Kakeru had taught me to stay bright and cheerful, just like the fireworks.

“I’m going to spray you, so turn around.”

“Thank you.”

I turned around, gathering my hair at the front so it would be easier for

him to get my neck. When the cold spray touched my skin, I let out a small shriek.

All of a sudden, Kakeru embraced me from behind.

"Wh-what's going on?"

The abruptness of his embrace made my heart pound.

"It's just…," Kakeru began hesitantly, "I'm scared that I'll get used to hearing you say that your tests came back 'all clear.'"

Oh.

Kakeru was shouldering this burden with me.

He's right, I thought to myself.

What if I started taking these clean bills of health for granted?

What if I was told there *was* a problem when I was least expecting it?

That would be terrifying.

Kakeru was carrying half my anxiety for me. The thought made me tear up.

"Thank you."

I thanked him again and again, then touched his hands wrapped around my body.

"This makes me really happy. But what if Mom sees us? Wouldn't that be awkward?"

Kakeru swiftly let go, as if he'd suddenly snapped back to reality.

"Sorry…," I heard him mutter.

"Shall we go?" I suggested. The spot where his arms had been remained warm, even after he'd stopped hugging me.

We stepped outside, hand in hand.

It was a tropical night.

I was drenched in so much sweat, it felt like the mosquito repellent we'd only just put on was washing off. Even the cries of the cicadas sounded listless from the heat.

"It's sweltering out here," Kakeru said.

"Yeah. I started sweating the moment I stepped outside."

"Should we go back?"

"Huh? Why?" I asked.

Apparently, Kakeru was worried the heat would be bad for my health.

"Come on, we're here now. We may as well make the most of it."

It was so funny I couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh, come to think of it," I began.

"Yeah?"

Something Kakeru had mentioned before had been playing on my mind.

“You said that Yuuko and Narumi have a complicated relationship.”

“Oh, that?”

“Yeah. What did you mean by it?”

“They dated while you were in the hospital.”

“No way!”

“Hard to believe, right?”

Kakeru said they’d started dating out of the blue in their third year of college. Then after less than three months, they’d broken up just as suddenly. He didn’t know the details of why they’d gotten together or split up.

“When two friends are dating, it’s best not to pry,” he said.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

I heard the *click-clack* of two sets of footsteps. I couldn’t imagine anyone else was out for a walk that night.

“Narumi said something didn’t feel right, so they went back to being friends, and that it was an amicable breakup. I do wonder what happened between them, though.”

“They didn’t act like exes at all when we went out for *monja*.”

“Right? They looked pretty close to me.”

“I guess they just get along as friends,” I said, feeling a little wistful. “Wow, that’s a shocking revelation. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was planning on telling you, but then they broke up almost immediately, so I didn’t get the chance.”

“Still, I can’t believe those two were together.”

I was relieved they’d stayed on good terms after the breakup—but I soon realized how self-centered that was. As selfish as it might be, I was just pleased that the four of us could still hang out together.

After a prolonged silence, Kakeru’s tone suddenly turned serious.

“I’m sorry I’ve only been able to see you in the evenings lately.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I appreciate you always making the effort to see me. How’s the job search going?”

“It’s all fine on that front. I’m sure it’ll work out. Or rather, I really need to make sure it does.”

“What’s with that wishy-washy comment?”

There was a hint of a joke in Kakeru’s voice, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“We’ve made it to Place de Paris. Do you want to rest for a while?” he asked.

“It’s okay. Let’s keep walking.”

Our usual route started with us crossing the road just outside my building and walking straight ahead—north, according to the map. At the tip of

Tsukishima was a plaza shaped like a crescent moon, called Place de Paris, where we would often stop to take a break. Then we'd continue along the path to Chuo-Ohashi Bridge, which led to Tsukuda Park. Once we got there, we would turn around and make our way back to my apartment building. That was our normal route.

"Why do you think it's called Place de Paris?" I mused.

"Good question. I'm not sure."

Kakeru explained that if you stood in the plaza and looked toward Asakusa, you could see Eitai Bridge glowing blue and Tokyo Skytree lit up in the same color behind it. The blue bridge and blue tower were mirrored on the dark surface of the water.

Black and blue. It sounded like an enchanting, dreamlike scene. My mind swirled with a captivating vision of the world around me.

"Maybe it's because the view looks kind of like Paris," I suggested.

"It's nice to imagine there are sights just like this in France."

"Yeah."

There was probably another meaning behind the plaza's name, but this scenery felt like a good enough explanation.

If there are rivers with pretty reflections in them in France as well, it must be lovely.

"You have an interview tomorrow, right?" I asked.

"Yeah. I've memorized my reasons for applying, and Hayase's been helping me out as well."

"How about I cook for you once all that stress is over?"

"Huh? Really?"

"I haven't just been practicing my household chores for my own sake. I'm doing it for you, too."

I was mortified that I'd blurted that out. It sounded as if I were asking to be his wife.

"Whoa, that's really kind. A five-course meal, huh? That'll be a lot of work to prepare."

Kakeru quickly retorted with a joke.

"Give me a break," I said, laughing. "It'll just be some curry."

"The spicy kind?"

"How about medium-hot as a compromise?"

"Right," I heard him say from beside me. "I guess I'll have to work hard, then."

"Good luck with the interview."

"I'll do my best for you, Koharu."

"Not for me," I immediately retorted. "You owe it to yourself to give this

your best shot."

As I said that, I felt a little strange. After a moment's thought, it hit me.

I was supposed to be learning how to do the housework for my own sake.

I needed to try my best for myself, not for Kakeru.

♪

"I think I've pretty much gotten the hang of doing the laundry and cleaning."

We were out on a walk another day, and I was sitting on a bench telling Kakeru about the progress I'd made.

He held my hand and listened.

Kakeru had a habit of softly saying "Whoa" when he was concentrating on what I was saying.

He was so good at being attentive, I couldn't help but worry that he was the same with other girls, too. But no. I couldn't imagine Kakeru being quite so thoughtful around anyone else. I just had a feeling.

"It's seriously amazing how you set goals for yourself and work toward them."

He said it so casually I couldn't help but let out a giggle, overjoyed. I wished he would pat my head, too.

Then out of nowhere, Kakeru's voice took on a more serious tone.

"What do you think my strengths are?"

When I asked what he meant by that, he explained that he was often asked to list his strengths in job interviews. He never knew how to respond, which had caused him to make a big mistake in his last interview.

"Huh?" I exclaimed, surprised.

"What?" Kakeru responded, taken aback. A hint of concern crept into his voice. "…Do I *not* have any strengths?"

"Of course you do," I said, frantically trying to fix the misunderstanding. "You have plenty of strengths—or rather, positive qualities. I was just wondering why you were asking me."

"Ahhh. Then can you tell me ten of my best traits?" Kakeru asked.

I started listing them, counting on my fingers as I went.

"You're kind. You're always helping me. You have a nice voice. Your hands are warm. You take the lead. You're handsome."

"Wait a minute, slow down."

Clearly embarrassed, Kakeru stopped me from counting any further.

"You were just reeling them off way too easily. It's embarrassing. Also, how do you know if I'm handsome?"

"You just are," I insisted. It was so cute when he acted all shy. "Now that we're on the topic, could you list ten of *my* best traits?"

"I could, but I'd be too embarrassed to say them here."

"Saying embarrassing things didn't seem to bother you back in Ginza!"

"I'll list them properly next time I get the chance."

"You're so mean," I joked, before getting the conversation back on track. "I didn't realize you had to talk about your own strengths in job interviews."

"Yeah."

"Personally, I think the fact that you treat me just like anybody else is a strength that sets you apart from other people."

"Really…?"

"Yep."

I could hear the buzz of the cicadas. *They must be hard workers, making all that noise even at night,* I thought to myself.

"Thank you," Kakeru said, subdued. "You never hesitate to tell me things like that. It honestly really helps me out."

He was expressing his gratitude. For some reason, it made me genuinely happy that he chose to confide in me. The thought that I could be helpful to someone made my heart feel full.

"Oh, I have an interview tomorrow," Kakeru said.

Although I couldn't see him, I could imagine him looking up at the sky, his expression a mixture of anticipation and apprehension.

♪

After coming home from college the following day, I called Kakeru as I was lazing around on my bed. When he answered, he sounded despondent—or maybe *prickly* was a better way to describe it.

"Did something go wrong?" I asked.

"Huh? Why?"

Kakeru had had his big interview that day. I'd called him, curious to hear how it went, but if his attitude was anything to go by, it couldn't have gone very well.

"You sound a little down."

"I'm fine. More than fine, in fact. I'm about to devote my life to the grind, something I truly love."

"I wish you wouldn't say you love anything apart from me."

"Huh? Not even the grind?"

"No. Just me."

“Fine.”

I could hear him laughing through the receiver, but he still sounded listless. His tone made me anxious.

“How did the interview go?” I asked, trying to sound as positive as possible.

Kakeru fell silent.

Oh no, I thought. *Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.* I panicked, chastising myself for being so insensitive.

“I’m sorry. Did it…not go well?”

“No, it’s not that. The interview wasn’t a problem. Thanks to you, it went great.”

“Then…what’s up?”

“I got into a bit of an argument…and withdrew my application.”

“A-an argument? About what?”

Kakeru went quiet again, so I told him to be honest with me. That I wanted to help him out.

“During the interview, I mentioned that my girlfriend was blind.”

“What? You talked about me?”

“Yeah. I said how cute and cheerful you are and how much I respect you.”

“O-oh…” I felt embarrassed, wishing he wouldn’t be so straightforward with his compliments.

The next words to leave Kakeru’s mouth caught me by surprise.

“That was when one of the interviewers said he was ‘surprised’ I’d choose to date someone like you.”

“What?”

“I told him he shouldn’t have said that. It came out before I could stop myself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for, Koharu? He was in the wrong. It was unacceptable—so I told him I was going to withdraw my application.”

Hearing what had happened, I was stunned.

He said that?

I suddenly found myself at a loss for words. My throat went dry, and I was overcome by a sensation like cold liquid rushing through my veins.

“Koharu?”

Aware that I had to respond, I forced myself to speak.

“It’s because you’re so in love with me. Ah, it’s a shame, considering things were going well. You don’t need to worry about me. You should have just ignored his comment.”

“No way.”

Kakeru sounded angry. He was getting mad at me, as if his emotions from earlier were flooding back.

An excruciating pain went through my chest. It felt like my heart had stopped.

"I'm about to start my shift, so I'll talk to you later."

With that, he hung up the phone.

As soon as the call ended, all the feelings I'd been suppressing threatened to come pouring out.

Am I dragging Kakeru down?

I couldn't help but feel worried.

"I don't want…to do that."

Hot tears began to leak from the corners of my eyes, landing in the palm of my hand.

It would make Mom worry if I cried here, so I went out to get some fresh air.

Leaning against the handrail of a slope in front of the apartment building, I let the nighttime breeze wash over me. It was more of a late-afternoon breeze, though. At this time of day, the sky was probably still orange.

I heard cars driving down the road. It didn't seem like many people were walking around. I caught the sound of bicycle wheels spinning and what I assumed were ferries coming from the direction of the Sumida River.

Would people think I was weird if I cried here by myself?

I suddenly realized that there were very few places where you could really have a good cry. It would be nice if there was some place people could go to bawl their eyes out without feeling bad about it.

As I was sniffing, holding back the tears that were threatening to overflow, I heard a voice.

"Koharu? What's wrong?"

It was Yuuko.

"Huh? Yuuko?"

"You gave me a shock there. I just spotted you as I was walking by."

I couldn't believe it was her.

Yuuko had been out drinking all afternoon with some people she met while job hunting, and they'd asked her to take them to the *monja* restaurant in Tsukishima. Afterward, she'd taken a walk to help her sober up, then decided to head home. She'd seen me just as she was passing my apartment building.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Did you have a fight with your mom?"

"No. It's nothing like that."

I hesitated for a moment.

“If you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. I think I’ll take a little break with you.”

Yuuko nestled up beside me. We were close enough that our shoulders were touching.

The two of us just stood there silently in a daze.

“Hey, Koharu,” Yuuko eventually said.

“What is it?”

“It’s still dusk, but you can see the moon.”

I got the impression that Yuuko was looking up at the sky. I angled my face upward as well, trying to imagine what it might look like. The image of a large moon popped into my head.

“There aren’t any clouds?” I asked.

“No clouds,” said Yuuko.

“What shape is it?”

“I think this is called a first quarter moon. You can see half of it.”

Half a moon was floating in the sky above us.

“Not every part of the moon shines; half of it’s dark. I guess we can all relate to that.”

Yuuko was being unusually philosophical. It must have been the alcohol.

“I agreed to stay friends with all the people I met while looking for work, even if we ended up at different companies. But now that we’re all working, it always just turns into a mixer. And some of the guys always try their luck, hoping to get you to go home with them.”

I couldn’t see her face, but I imagined she looked frustrated.

“What?! Are you okay?”

“Yeah, of course. I turned them down and left before we even made it to the second bar.”

“That’s just like you.”

“Of course it is!”

Yuuko’s terse response made me laugh, and I heard her laughing, too. For some reason, tonight, with the half-moon in the sky, I felt like I could air my grievances.

“So earlier…”

“Yeah?”

“I was on the phone with Kakeru…”

“Okay.”

“And he said his love life had come up during the interview for the job he wants the most.”

“What? Sorano was acting all lovestruck in the interview?”

“No, it’s not that. One of the interviewers made a negative comment about

me, so he pulled out."

After a beat, I heard a "Huhhh?" from Yuuko.

"I mean, Sorano didn't do anything wrong," she quickly added, "but why would he tell *you* about it? Also, do you know how much time I spent practicing for that interview with him? He can't just pull out."

Yuuko's voice was seething with anger.

"Come on, Koharu. Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"To Sorano's work."

"What? Now?"

"A taxi just came by. I'll get it to stop for us."

Once Yuuko had an idea, there was no stopping her.

In a state of blank amazement, I was almost shoved into a taxi, and we made our way to Kakeru's workplace.

I knew Kakeru worked at a café in the basement of Tokyo Station, and that they served alcohol at night. When I admitted that I'd never actually been there, Yuuko told me that she dropped by from time to time. "They have booze, after all." She laughed gleefully, making me wonder since when she'd become so obsessed with drinking.

"We're here."

Yuuko had lent me her arm, and I felt her come to a halt.

"Is it really okay for us to be here?" I asked. "Kakeru's working."

"Of course it is. Things quiet down before closing anyway."

Predictably, Yuuko spoke like a regular.

"Come on, let's go inside," she said, dragging me into the bar.

We were immediately greeted by Kakeru's voice.

"Welcome. Go ahead and take a seat."

The cacophony of voices inside the establishment made me think he must be busy.

"Huh?! Hayase? Koharu?" He sounded bewildered. "What're you doing here?"

"Don't give me that!" said Yuuko. "Isn't there something you want to say to me, Sorano?"

"Wait, what? Where did this come from all of a sudden?"

Yuuko was enraged, while Kakeru sounded unsettled. I was sure she was bearing down on him.

"You backed out of an interview that was finally going well for you? Koharu told me! You owe me a proper explanation! I'll sit and wait!" she announced. "Come on, Koharu!"

With that, Yuuko directed me toward a table.

"I'm sorry, Kakeru!" I called out.

"It's okay," he replied. "Just relax and enjoy yourself."

"Oh, and Sorano!" yelled Yuuko.

"Ma'am, would you mind lowering your voice slightly inside?"

"Get me a whiskey and soda!"

After leaving Kakeru with that parting remark, Yuuko guided me to a seat.

"Kakeru seemed troubled, didn't he?" I asked.

"Ha-ha. Yeah, he sure did. Forget about that, though—do you want something to eat? The food here's pretty good. Narumi's in charge of the kitchen, and he's a decent cook."

Yuuko read out the menu for me, and I asked for an egg salad sandwich and a milk tea.

"Hey! Sorano!"

"What do *you* want?"

Kakeru came over to us, sounding completely fed up.

"Can't you act a little friendlier? You're in the service industry, you know," Yuuko teased.

"If I get fired, it'll be your fault."

"Let's see… Can we get an egg salad sandwich, a milk tea, and one of this tomato pasta?"

"You're just going to ignore me?"

"I'm really sorry for barging in on you without any notice," I said, bowing in the direction Kakeru's voice was coming from.

"Well, now that you're here, you might as well relax. I'll cut the egg salad sandwich into bite-sized pieces, okay?"

"Thank you."

Having taken our order, Kakeru left.

"Oh, right, Narumi works here, too, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. They were trying to fill Narumi's old position just when Sorano started looking for a part-time job."

"Hey, Yuuko?"

"What's up?"

"Can I ask you a difficult question?"

"Sure."

"Isn't it awkward to come here after you and Narumi broke up? You're not doing this for my sake, are you?"

"It's totally fine. You worry too much, Koharu," Yuuko said with a laugh.

At that moment, Kakeru came back with our drinks.

"One whiskey and soda and a milk tea. Wait, what's so funny?"

“Nothing. Anyway, we’ll have a meeting about your next job-hunting move later.”

“Oh, okay,” Kakeru gloomily replied before getting back to work.

Yuuko raised her glass and said, “Cheers.” The long gulping noise and satisfied sigh that followed proved that she really was quite the drinker.

“Did you drink that whole thing in one go?” I asked.

“No, of course not. There’s still a quarter left.” A moment later, she yelled out, “Same again, Sorano!”

There was just something comedic about the whole situation, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Hey, Yuuko,” I said softly.

“Yeah?”

“Why did you and Narumi break up?”

After a brief pause, she said, “Oh, I guess I never told you the whole story. I didn’t grow to hate him, obviously.”

Yuuko’s voice was gentle.

“I like him as a person, we get along as friends, and being with him feels easy. I just don’t think we were destined to be together.”

“Destiny?” I asked, uncertain.

“Yeah, destiny. Can you envision a life after you and Kakeru break up?”

“Break up? Me and Kakeru?”

Thinking about it now…I’d never even considered the possibility.

“Not at all,” I told her.

“After just one month of dating, I got scared. I was frightened that if we broke up, we wouldn’t be able to stay friends. Even though I liked him and we got along. Weird, right?”

There was a sadness in Yuuko’s voice as she said it.

“Once you start thinking like that, it’s all over.”

Yuuko gave a pained laugh.

“I’m sorry,” I told her.

Just then, another voice interrupted my thoughts.

“No way! If it ain’t Hayase and Fuyutsuki.”

It was Narumi.

“Here ya go. One tomato pasta and an egg salad sandwich.”

Clank, clank. I heard him put the plates down on the table.

“Thanks,” Yuuko said.

“What were you guys chattin’ about?” Narumi asked.

“I was telling Koharu about when we dated.”

A faint whiff of alcohol came from Yuuko’s direction.

“Hey! Could ya not?”

“What’s the problem? It’s no big deal.”

The tone in their voices made it sound like they were still close.

“Come on, Narumi. You can’t stand around chatting,” Kakeru said, having walked over to our table. “Here you go. Whiskey and soda, round two.”

“You made it strong?”

“As strong as I could without running the risk of losing my job.”

Kakeru’s henchman-like tone almost made me crack up again.

“There’s hardly any customers left, so it should be fine, right?” argued Narumi.

“Why don’t you two have a drink with us, then?” Yuuko asked. “My treat.”

“I’ll hafta pass.”

“I can’t right now.”

Narumi and Kakeru’s voices overlapped, which I found funny.

“Too good to drink with me, huh?” Yuuko said, followed by another long gulping noise.

“Jeez, you’re drinkin’ way too much,” scolded Narumi. “I’m not takin’ responsibility if you can’t get home again.”

“That’sh okay, I’ll be fiiine.”

Yuuko was starting to slur her words.

“Anyway, what were you two talking about?” asked Kakeru.

Well and truly drunk by now, Yuuko dropped a bombshell.

“Koharu was curious about it, so I was telling her about when Narumi and I dated. When we first started going out, I hoped we’d turn out like you and Koharu. Buuut I broke up with him when I realized we weren’t destined to be together.”

She was speaking so bluntly I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

“You good with her talking about this, Narumi?” Kakeru asked.

“It’s all in the past. Besides, I think I probably came to the same conclusion. We’d been datin’ for three months, but I felt the same as I had when we were just friends. No butterflies in the stomach when we held hands or nothin’.”

“Isn’t that just so mean?” Yuuko said. “He held my hand and went, ‘Nope. No butterflies here.’”

“You laughed ’n’ said you felt the same way!”

Hearing the pair bicker, Kakeru chuckled. “Are you guys serious?”

“We just weren’t meant to be,” Yuuko continued. “So I can’t help but feel jealous when I see two people who’ve been brought together by fate.”

She must have been talking about Kakeru and me.

“What even is fate?” asked Kakeru.

“Fate’s *fate*,” Yuuko said, before raising her voice. “Anyway! I really want you guys to have a happy future together.”

It sounded like that comment had been directed toward Kakeru.

I could tell Yuuko truly wanted the best for us. It reminded me of just how grateful I was to have her as a friend.

“Thanks,” Kakeru said.

“It’s your duty to make Koharu happy! But first, you gotta find a job! So what are you gonna do about it?!”

Yuuko was being pretty tough on him.

“Hang on. Just earlier, I got an e-mail through a job website.”

“You have my permission to open it.”

“Your kindness is greatly appreciated.”

“What the heck?” Narumi exclaimed.

It was such a strange discussion, I couldn’t help but laugh. It was always a fun time when we all got together.

Suddenly, I heard Kakeru let out an exclamation of surprise.

“What does it say?”

“It’s an e-mail from the company where I pulled out of the interview. They’re asking if they can meet me somewhere to apologize.”

♪

Making the curry took all day.

I went to the supermarket to buy the ingredients without Mom’s help, then chopped everything up and cooked it all by myself.

I’d started at ten in the morning, and it was already evening.

It took much longer than it normally would, but to me, it felt like a big step.

“Have you made the curry, Koharu?”

“Yeah.”

Right at the end, Mom stepped in with some advice.

“Measure the amount of rice just by touching it.”

She’d chosen the prewashed rice for me, so all I had to do was soak it. I put the rice in the rice cooker and felt around for the button on the far right. Most appliances had a bump on the START button, which made it easier to find. Using that as my guide, I pressed the button to start cooking the rice, and the machine played a sped-up version of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” I suddenly found myself wondering why they’d chosen that particular song.

“What time will Sorano be here?” asked Mom.

“He’s supposed to be here at seven.”

“In that case, should I make a salad to go with the curry?”

“Uh-uh. I’m determined to make everything myself today.”

“Meanie,” I heard Mom say.

Today was the day I’d invited Kakeru over for dinner.

“Thank you for dinner!”

I heard Kakeru clap his hands together, then the clink of a spoon hitting a plate.

Mom had tied up my hair before the meal.

“I hope you like the food, Sorano,” she said.

“Mooom! Why are *you* the one saying that?”

She and Kakeru both laughed.

“Did you make all of this, Koharu?” he asked.

“Yes. I did everything from the shopping to the cooking.”

“Whoa. That’s amazing.”

I’d been on tenterhooks worrying about how Kakeru would react. I’d done a lot of taste tests, and it seemed fine to me, but at a time like this, not being able to see his expression only added to my nerves.

How was he going to react?

I was incredibly anxious, but there was nothing I could do about it.

“It tastes great.”

The first words out of Kakeru’s mouth left me feeling so, *so* relieved.

“Really?”

“Yeah. The vegetables are the perfect size, and they’ve absorbed all the flavors.”

“Yay! I’m happy to hear that.”

“I’m the one who should be happy. You even mixed the spices yourself.”

“Huh?”

“You really didn’t have to go all the way to Ameyoko to buy them for me, you know.”

I could hear Mom giggling. That was when I realized Kakeru was joking.

“I didn’t go to Ameyoko! I used a store-bought curry roux! If you’re going to wind me up, I’ll make it extra spicy next time!”

“That’s fine by me—in fact, I’d love it. Are you sure you can handle the heat, though, Koharu?”

“This medium-hot curry is pushing it for me.”

“It is, huh?”

“Pushing it…over the edge.”

My mouth had been burning from the heat for a while now.

Kakeru laughed at me. “Ha-ha. See, it’s too much.”

“We’ve always eaten it mild, since that’s what Koharu prefers,” Mom explained.

“We can have it mild next time. You don’t need to push yourself,” Kakeru reassured me.

“I’m sure I’ll get used to it, so don’t worry,” I said.

“Really, though, thank you.”

Just those few words from Kakeru made my heart feel full. He was sitting across from me, so I stretched out my leg and entwined it with his.

“What?” he asked, but I didn’t know how to respond. I was so happy, and all I wanted was to feel close to him. I wished he understood how women thought.

“It’s good?”

“Really good.”

“I wouldn’t mind hearing that a million times over.”

“Give me a break,” Kakeru groaned. I wasn’t sure what expression he was making, but I knew it would be kind.

“By the way, I have some news,” he said, a solemn note in his voice.

“Ohhh? What is it?” Mom asked.

“I’ve managed to secure a job.”

“I’m guessing things went well the other day?”

A few days after Kakeru pulled out of his interview, he’d gone to meet an employee from the company at a café in Monzen-nakacho. The meeting ended up being with a high-ranking executive. The man had started out with an apology, then explained that someone who has the courage to speak up when something is wrong was precisely the type of person he wanted working for him and offered Kakeru a job.

After talking with the man for a short while, Kakeru decided to take him up on his offer. He was impressed that the company was willing to take a student like him seriously.

“I know I made you worry, Koharu.”

“Oh my!” exclaimed Mom. “That’s wonderful news!”

“If I knew this was a celebratory occasion, I would have made sukiyaki instead.”

“I’d be happy no matter what you made, Koharu.”

I wanted to fling my arms around Kakeru right then and there but held back in front of Mom.

Nothing could have prepared me for what she said next:

“Sorano, why don’t you come and live with us after you graduate?”

“What?!”

Mom was giggling, so I thought she must be making fun of him.

"Stop it, Mom."

My pulse had sped up a little. I'd found myself envisioning what living with Kakeru might be like.

Oh, that's right.

Kakeru had a job lined up now, meaning that might actually be a possibility.

Recently, I'd also started being able to do things like wash clothes, clean dishes, and cook.

Would the two of us be able to build a life together?

Thinking about it made my body feel hot…but I'm sure that was just the curry.

"Koharu?" I heard Kakeru say.

"Y-yes?"

"What's wrong? You drifted off for a moment."

"No, it's nothing," I replied, flashing him a smile.

I really hoped that was the future we had ahead of us. I was going to do everything I could to make it a reality.

Just then, my thoughts were interrupted by Mom's voice.

"Oh, fireworks! I almost forgot—tonight's the Sumidagawa Fireworks Festival."

"You can see them from here?" Kakeru asked.

"There's an apartment block right in front of where they set them off, so you can only catch a glimpse of them."

Having said that, Mom went silent. Kakeru was quiet, too. I was sure they were both staring out the window.

"Can you see them?" I asked.

"Oh, sorry," Kakeru apologized. "I got too caught up in it. Yeah, but like your mom said, that apartment block is in the way."

"The view opens up if you go toward Eitai Bridge, so you could probably see them from there," Mom said.

"Maybe we could see them from Place de Paris," Kakeru murmured.

"Leave the tidying up to me. Go and take a look."

"I'll do it when I get home," I told her.

"It's fine, honestly."

"No, leave it to me."

"Just go and enjoy yourselves!"

"Those plates better still be there when I get back!"

After that back-and-forth with Mom, Kakeru and I went outside.

We left the apartment building and made our way down the usual

promenade. I always walked on Kakeru's left-hand side, so it made me happy when he automatically positioned himself on my right.

There weren't many people around, likely because we were so far from where they were setting the fireworks off. I heard the faint sound of explosions.

"I hope you can see the fireworks," I said.

"If I can, that spot will really be a hidden gem."

Kakeru lent me his arm as we were walking. Being the end of July, it was humid and hot, and Kakeru's arm was a little sticky.

"We're almost at Place de Paris."

Kakeru had come to a stop, so I squeezed his arm tight. The top of his shoulder smelled like him. Is there something about the smell of the person they love that makes women go crazy? I don't know, but it made me want to squeeze him even tighter. I nuzzled against his shoulder.

"Want to sit down?"

The sound of Kakeru's voice brought me back to my senses.

"I don't mind standing," I said. "Can you see any fireworks?"

I sensed other people in the square. I could hear chatter and cries of "There they are! I can see them!"

"Yeah, I can," Kakeru replied.

"Tell me about them."

He described the fireworks to me.

"A big one just exploded over Eitai Bridge. It burst in a circle, glittering silver. The next one looks like it's just in front of Tokyo Skytree. That one's called a triple core. It has different colors in it—red, blue, and yellow—all sparkling toward the center."

The sound from the fireworks was so faint. They must have been so far away and looked really small from where we were.

But in my imagination, they were huge.

Massive fireworks soaring into the sky, one after the next, between the blue glow of Eitai Bridge and the blue lights of Tokyo Skytree. I could almost hear the thunderous bangs as they painted the surface of the Sumida River with their vibrant colors.

"The multi-shot aerials have started. They're firing up into the air with bursts of yellow."

Kakeru's words filled my head with yellow light.

I might not have been able to see, but with Kakeru by my side, even I could enjoy the fireworks. I was truly grateful that he was there with me. I meant that from the bottom of my heart.

He made my world so much bigger. I wanted to stay by his side forever.

Together, just like this.

Colorful fireworks were shining in front of me. Holding onto Kakeru's right hand, I rested my head on his shoulder.

"I love you," I whispered softly.

"Did you say something?" he asked.

"Nope."

I smiled at him. I wanted to show him the best version of myself, even if just for a second.

"Thank you for bringing me here," I said.

"It's no problem," he replied. "I wanted to see the fireworks, too."

"This spot really is a hidden gem."

"We should come back next year."

As we were chatting, I heard my phone ring.

"Sorry, give me a second."

I tapped the screen and found out the call was from Mom. Unsure of why she might be calling, I answered the phone. The first thing she said was "I have some bad news, Koharu!"

"What's wrong?"

She sounded strange, and as I listened, she told me something completely unexpected.

"Your grandmother in Niigata passed away."

♪

The grandmother who'd passed away was my dad's mom, Yoshiko. We had been planning a get-together to celebrate her eighty-eighth birthday later in the year, but she'd died from complications brought on by flu before we had the chance.

The next day, we went to pay our respects.

Dad headed straight there from work, so Mom and I took the bullet train, just the two of us.

There was a wake and a funeral.

To tell the truth, I had very few memories with my grandmother. Dad hardly ever went back home, and I hadn't had much of a chance to since I got sick.

I guess that was why I didn't really feel sad about my grandmother's passing. I was mostly just annoyed that I couldn't help out with the wake or funeral.

Dad was the chief mourner, meaning that Mom also had a lot on her plate.

From the moment she received the sad news, she'd been rushing around nonstop. Not only had she had to arrange a venue and contact my grandmother's relatives and acquaintances, she'd also gone to the effort of preparing mourning clothes for me to wear. The work didn't stop once we made it to my grandmother's house, either. Mom had to arrange food for the wake and greet everyone who came. She hardly had time to breathe.

The people who were most upset were also the busiest. I wanted to help out in some way as well. I *wanted* to, but all I could do to help was kneel formally in the corner of the room.

I was an adult, so why was I so useless?

I ground my teeth in frustration. I wished with every fiber of my being that I could see.

"Well, she made it to eighty-seven. She lived a full life," I heard one of my relatives say.

The atmosphere at my grandmother's wake was far from somber, and everyone thanked her for all the things she'd done for them as they said their good-byes. That felt like the only positive thing to come out of it all.

Once the wake, funeral, and cremation were over, we had a meal at my grandmother's house.

The large room smelled of incense. It was packed with people.

"Can you stay here for me, Koharu?" asked Mom. She told me she was going to pour some drinks for the guests. I thought I could hear Dad far away, surrounded by family members.

"Have you eaten, Koharu?" I heard one of my relatives ask. He was an older man who I remembered being introduced to me as my dad's cousin.

"Yes, I have. The food is delicious."

"That's because the rice is locally sourced. Minamiuonuma produces the best rice in all of Japan," he told me. "Let me know if you're struggling with anything. Don't hesitate to ask."

He must have come over because he was worried about me being blind. I was relieved there were people here who were kind like Kakeru, but at the same time, it reignited my guilt over being unable to help.

I randomly found myself wondering just how many people there were around me.

Dad's side of the family—the Fuyutsukis—had always had a lot of people in it, and my grandmother had made a lot of acquaintances over the many years she'd spent working on the farm.

When I faced straight ahead and listened carefully, I heard all sorts of sounds: adults talking and laughing, glasses being put down, people setting the table, parents scolding their children for eating with their fingers, and the

thumping footsteps of kids running around.

All of a sudden, a conversation I'd had with my grandmother came flooding back.

It had been a year before I lost my sight, when my family was staying over at her house. Now that I thought about it, I realized it was the last time I had seen her.

We were sitting side by side on the veranda, covertly enjoying some watermelon despite the fact that she was diabetic.

"Koharu?"

"Yes?"

"You might end up with a serious illness like me."

I couldn't understand why she was saying that to me, but there was something convincing about her words.

"That's just how fate is. It only inflicts these ordeals on people who can overcome them. That's why I'll be okay."

As she spoke, she cut me a slice of watermelon.

"This one's for you," she said, passing it to me. *"You know what, Koharu?"*

"What?"

"You've got to try your hardest."

"I do?"

"When you're trying your hardest, people want to support you. Nobody takes any notice of layabouts."

Grandma slurped her watermelon as she ate it. *"It's nice and sweet,"* she said, her face crumpling into a smile.

"Smiling's important, too. When you smile, the people around you will help you out. Good people will flock to you. Folks stay away from a Gloomy Gus."

She spat out the seeds as she said that.

"Try your hardest and keep on smiling."

Those were the two things that mattered in life, Grandma told me with a smile.

Thinking back on it now, I felt like I understood. She had been surrounded by all these people.

Despite being blind, even I could tell that lots of people had gathered to say good-bye to her and that none of them were being too morose.

"I'd like something like this for myself," I murmured absentmindedly.

"Something like what?" asked Mom.

"Wh—? Huh? You're back?"

"I sure am. Oh, Koharu, do you want some *inari* sushi? I'm putting some

on your plate for you. It's at twelve o'clock."

"You've really been working hard, Mom," I said to her.

She must have moved closer, because I heard her whisper in my ear.

"Your dad has, too. He's barely slept."

"I really hope he doesn't collapse…"

"It would be nice if we could all go to the hot springs and relax once this is over."

"Ha-ha. That does sound nice."

"Do you think Sorano would join us?"

"I'm not sure how he'd feel about hanging out naked with Dad."

"Good point," said Mom, bursting with laughter.

"You're so silly, Mom."

I stood up to go to the toilet, and Mom said, "Let me come with you." As I was walking to the back of the room, holding my phone and bag, I heard a scurry of footsteps coming from beside me. "Stop running!" a voice shouted. The next thing I knew, somebody had crashed into me with a *thud*.

"Koharu!" exclaimed Mom.

I'd landed on my butt.

I heard several people asking me if I was okay and someone who seemed to be apologizing to Mom, saying, "Sorry about my kid."

A child had bumped into me while they were running.

"I'm sorry, lady," a young voice said. I couldn't check to see whether the kid was injured, though.

"It's okay," I replied. "You're not hurt, are you?"

They assured me they were fine, which was a relief.

"Are you okay, Koharu?" Mom asked, gently helping me up.

"I'm fine. Those kids really are just full of energy."

"I think you dropped your phone when you fell over."

Mom handed me my phone. When I touched the screen, something felt wrong.

"The screen's got a little crack in it," she told me.

I ran my fingers across it. There was a bit of a rough patch in the upper-right corner.

"Something like this is no big deal," I said. "It still seems to work fine."

"Are you sure you don't want to get it repaired?"

"If I drop it again, I might have no other choice but to ask you to fix it."

"You better be careful, then," Mom said with another laugh.

When we were tidying up after the meal, I heard my relatives talking about me. They probably didn't know I was there, so I stayed as quiet as possible. I didn't want them to notice me.

“She can’t even keep out of the children’s way.”

“She’ll have a hard time raising kids.”

“She might be able to get married, but I doubt she could ever give birth.”

“Even marriage would be a challenge. She wouldn’t be able to help out with the housework.”

There didn’t seem to be any malice in their voices. Their remarks were so casual, they may as well have been discussing the weather.

I tried to fade into the background and pretend I wasn’t there.

When we got back to Tokyo, Mom was mad at Dad.

“Why didn’t you get angry when they said all those things about Koharu?” she asked, sticking up for me.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sounding completely exhausted. “It’s the truth, though, so what was I supposed to say?”

His words cut into my heart like a knife. It was even more devastating than anything my relatives had said.

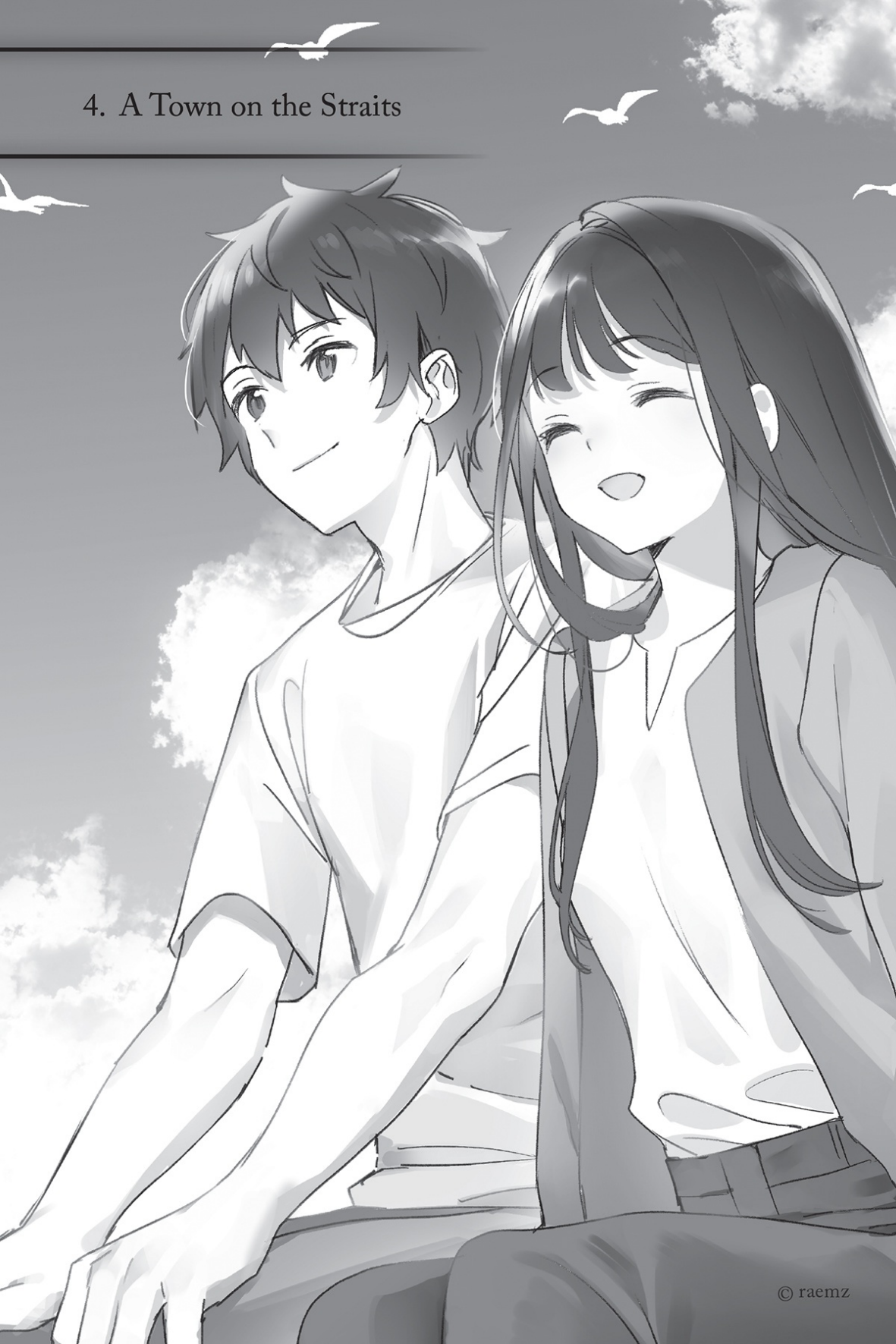
I couldn’t keep out of the kids’ way.

I couldn’t help out.

Despite what I told myself, I wasn’t normal.

I felt as though I’d been confronted with the harsh reality that, for the rest of my life, I wouldn’t be able to survive without the help of someone else.

4. A Town on the Straits



♪

"Now that I've found a job, I'm thinking of going back home for a visit. Do you want to come with me, Koharu?"

I'd always wanted to go to the town where Kakeru was born and raised. The Kanmon Straits were famed for their fast currents, and I wanted to feel what it was like firsthand.

So when Kakeru invited me to come home with him, I was delighted. My heart raced along with my thoughts.

But that wasn't the only emotion I felt.

I was worried about the trip. I hated flying. Even old, unsteady elevators frightened me, and that feeling got so bad with planes it made me want to scream.

When I went to the hospital in Hokkaido, I was too ill to even consider flying. I flew back home when I was discharged, though, and I actually ended up crying. Ever since then, I'd had no choice but to travel by bullet train instead. Even that was hard. I avoided going to the restroom.

A two-hour trip from Tokyo to Niigata was one thing, but it would take about four hours on the bullet train to get to Kokura, a town in Kitakyushu. I hoped I'd be okay.

Still, I'd never be able to go traveling if I kept worrying about those kinds of things. It was something I'd need to overcome at some point, so I just had to get it together.

I'm sure I'll be able to manage the long trip, I told myself.

Yeah.

That wasn't the source of my anxiety, though.

I was most worried about meeting Kakeru's mom.

My relatives' comments were playing on a loop inside my head, and Dad's words made my heart ache all over again.

Was I really okay the way I was? Would it bother her that I was blind?

I was scared of rejection. I couldn't help it.

Kakeru assured me that things would be okay. I wanted to believe him, but

that thought only raised more questions.

What if she *did* accept me? What would I do if she *did* approve of me?

That idea was scary in its own right.

It was one thing if we were dating, but what if we took it a step further?

At that time, I couldn't stop worrying about those sorts of things.

I couldn't stop thinking about what my relatives and Dad had said.

What if, once Kakeru was working and I'd graduated from college, our relationship progressed to the next stage?

I was sure Kakeru was thinking about our future, too. I could just tell.

He'd found a proper job, met my mother, and even said he wanted to meet my father.

Still…

But still…

Ever since that day, I couldn't stop wondering.

Was it really okay for me to be with him?

I was sickly and blind. I couldn't even keep out of the way of running children.

It took me a long time to do chores, and there weren't many dishes I could cook.

I knew being together wasn't going to be easy. I'd need him to help me with a lot of things. Wouldn't that…ruin Kakeru's life?

Those worries had always taken up space in my head. Was it selfish of me to want to be with him? Was I good enough for him?

If that was how I felt, maybe I shouldn't have gone out with him in the first place.

He'd had faith in me when my health took a turn for the worse, and I'd been given a miracle. But now that we'd come out the other side, I couldn't help but ask myself if I was being selfish.

Those thoughts raced through my mind.

There was nothing I could do to stop them.

"Koharu? It's time to wake up. We just got to Kokura."

I heard Kakeru's voice. It was so gentle.

I'd dozed off while I was having those unpleasant thoughts and ended up falling asleep.

"Sorry," I apologized. "I was nodding off there."

“Nodding off? You were fast asleep.”

I could hear Kakeru laughing. It seemed like he’d picked up on my distress and purposely made an effort to respond cheerfully.

He’s so kind.

“I’ll probably have a hard time sleeping tonight,” I said.

I felt bad. Hadn’t Kakeru been bored?

“Don’t worry. I was asleep, too.”

His warm words echoed in my ears.

I’d felt a warmth in my right palm for a while now. I wrapped my fingers around it and realized the heat was coming from Kakeru’s hand.

Oh.…

The warmth spread throughout my mind. I felt so happy. The reservations that had been weighing on me just moments earlier vanished.

I wanted this…

I wanted to stay with Kakeru forever and ever.

I couldn’t help but feel that way.

It was so selfish of me.

♪

We changed trains at Kokura Station, boarding the old railroad line to Shimonoseki.

The train made a loud *clickety-clack* as it rattled along the tracks and shook me all over the place, which was fun. As we were pulling into Shimonoseki Station, Kakeru received a LINE message from his mom.

“Sounds like she has to work late. She says we should go somewhere to kill time.”

“I really appreciate her making the time for us when she’s so busy.”

“What should we do?”

“I want to go to the bank of the Kanmon Straits. You told me about it before.”

“You got it,” Kakeru said, holding my hand.

From there, the two of us hopped on a bus. It was empty, so we sat side by side.

Eventually, the long stretch of low-rise buildings gave way to a view of the water.

Kakeru described everything to me. The bus we were on was blue, so in my mind, I pictured the blue bus driving alongside the blue sea, with the blue sky stretching out above it.

We got off at a stop called Kaikyokan-mae.

“What’s Kaikyokan?” I asked.

Kakeru explained that it was an aquarium.

“But first,” he said, “we need to cross the street. Make sure you hold my hand tight.”

“You’re treating me like a child again.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Not really, I guess.”

As we crossed at the crosswalk, Kakeru continued to describe our surroundings.

It was just a little farther to the Kanmon Straits. We were in an area that bordered the water, and a fish market called Karato Market was on our left. Straight ahead was the aquarium, and to the right of it was a small amusement park with a Ferris wheel. According to Kakeru, this part of town was a big tourist spot.

There was a café in front of the amusement park, so we got some drinks to go.

“What do you want, Koharu?” Kakeru asked.

“Do you have milk tea?” I asked the server, who said that they did.

Kakeru kindly carried my iced milk tea for me.

We found a place to sit behind the amusement park. Apparently, we had a clear view of the Kanmon Straits from there. The air smelled different from what I was used to in Tsukishima. Here, there was a powerful, salty smell, and the wind was strong.

Since we were behind the amusement park, I could hear the roller coaster going around and the excited cries of the riders.

“The sea is right in front of us?” I asked.

“You can see it?”

“How could I?”

I told Kakeru off for making that same old joke, and he laughed.

“I want you to describe it to me, like you usually do.”

As always, Kakeru expanded my horizons in that kind, gentle voice of his.

Blue. The sea, the mountains, the sky, the town on the other side of the strait—all of it was blue. The sunlight reflected off the surface of the water like a mirror. The world was dazzlingly bright. The current flowed steadily toward our right. The scene made it feel as if time had come to a stop, with the water the only thing still moving. That was how Kakeru described it to me.

I closed my eyes and tried to picture it.

I felt as if I was becoming one with the scenery, merging with our shining

blue surroundings.

"This feels so nice," I whispered.

"You like it here?" Kakeru asked.

"It's a nice spot."

The humid sea breeze felt pleasant somehow.

"If we're right in front of the water, does that mean you can swim in it?"

"No way. You'd drown," Kakeru said, before adding, "You wouldn't even last ten seconds."

"How fast is the current?"

"Uhhh." He thought to himself for a moment. "About the same speed Momotaro came tumbling down the stream in his giant peach?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I've always wondered this, but don't you think that peach must've been traveling crazy fast for it to immediately appear where someone could grab it? That old lady who waded in to get it would've been in serious danger."

"Ah-ha-ha! It's only a story," I said, bursting with laughter. "So you're saying it's as fast as a narrow stream?"

"Yeah. That's exactly what I was trying to say."

"It's really that fast?" I turned to face the water again.

At that moment, I heard a loud steam whistle. Kakeru explained that a large container ship was passing in front of us.

"That reminds me, I bought some sandwiches before getting on the bullet train. Want one?" he offered.

"Sure. I'm starving."

"Maybe I should've woken you up on the train."

"It's okay. It was my fault for falling asleep."

"Are you tired?"

"Not now that I've had a nap. I'm full of energy! I just hope I'll be able to sleep tonight."

"Sorry you have to stay at my family home."

"What's there to be sorry about?"

"It's just, it's a new environment for you. You might find it hard to relax."

"It's no big deal," I told him. "But you will have to explain the bathroom and the bath to me in detail."

That was one favor I *definitely* needed to ask of him.

A pressing issue like that wasn't something to be embarrassed about. The fact was, I *did* feel a little embarrassed, but it wasn't something I could go without asking.

"That makes sense," Kakeru replied. "If I were to get in the bath or use the toilet with my eyes closed, I'd want a really detailed explanation of where

everything was."

He tried to understand every single struggle of mine. That made me so happy, I found myself grabbing hold of his shirt.

"Oh, my mom said she'd take a bath with you."

"Thanks, but no thanks!"

I immediately dismissed the offer. That would be taking things a step too far.

"When I told Mom I was bringing you home, she assumed we were getting married," Kakeru said, his tone gentle. "All I wanted to do was tell her we were dating."

Hearing that left me at a loss for words. How was I supposed to respond?

At that moment, a strong sea breeze ruffled my hair, and I quickly held it down with a hand. Once the wind died down again, I began to speak.

"I…I hope I can come and greet her again properly after I graduate from college."

That was my way of glossing over the subject. My heart ached.

In truth, I wanted to ask whether I was really good enough for him. I wanted to be up-front about my worries and ask Kakeru how he felt.

But what if—in a one-in-a-million chance—my questions caused our relationship to end? I was too scared to ask.

All of a sudden, I heard someone squeal with joy, followed by the sound of splashing water.

"What's that sound?" I asked.

"Oh, there must be a dolphin show at the aquarium."

"Dolphins?"

"Do you want to go? It sounds like Mom might be a while."

I was surprised by how blasé Kakeru sounded about it.

Sometimes, I wondered whether he'd forgotten that I was blind altogether. He was the only person who made me feel that way.

Thinking about that now made my chest hurt. But as happy as I felt, it didn't stop the pangs of pain.

"You really are so kind, Kakeru, inviting me to the aquarium."

"Well, you've enjoyed a lot of stuff despite being blind. You wanted to set off fireworks, play the piano, and ride on the water taxi."

"I don't know what to do…"

Kakeru was the only one for me. I felt that way with all my heart, but I had no idea what to do about it.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I'm so happy, I don't know what to do."

"You're not forcing yourself to make a decision you don't want to, are

you? You're sure you're not interested in the aquarium?"

His gentle voice made my heart flutter.

"Let's go, then. To the aquarium."

I was going to the aquarium for the first time in ten years.

I showed my disability pass at the ticket desk.

"I'm so lucky!" I told him. "I get a discount."

Kakeru was tongue-tied. He was so focused on being considerate that he ended up glitching. *Come on, don't worry about it,* I thought—but at the same time, his thoughtfulness *was* one of the things I loved about him. I just told him not to worry about that stuff in the future.

The air conditioning was on inside the aquarium. As we went up the escalator, the sound of water became audible. I could almost hear it being circulated around the building.

I put my hand against the glass of one tank. It felt cool to the touch.

"Isn't that cold?"

"It's fine. What's in this fish tank?"

"It looks like it's filled with fish from the Kanmon Straits. There are sea bream, mackerel, stingrays, and all sorts of other fish whose names I don't know."

Kakeru described each tank one by one. He'd say things like "There's a big fish here," or "This one's a big shark," or "Oh, it says here this one's a yellowtail amberjack." He made a real effort to describe everything to me.

"Oh, by the way…"

"Yes?"

"There are stickers on the tanks telling you the best way to eat the fish."

"*Pfft.* Are you serious?"

"Totally serious. For the yellowtail amberjack, it says 'sashimi.'"

"That sounds like something you'd make up, Kakeru."

The tanks in the aquarium suddenly sounded more like the sort of live fish tanks you found in high-end restaurants.

"Hey, there's a tiger puffer fish right in front of us. Shimonoseki is known as the city of fugu, so even this aquarium promotes it."

"Are they puffed up in the water?"

"Puffer fish only inflate when they feel threatened."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"The only one who puffs out her cheeks for no reason is you, Koharu."

"What do you mean 'for no reason'?" I asked, puffing out my cheeks.

"Oh! Can I take a picture of you like that?"

Click. I heard a shutter sound.

“Hey, quit it,” I protested. But then Kakeru turned the conversation in a different direction.

“Maybe someday, they’ll create technology that allows people who can’t see to experience photos and videos… That’s why I want to take as many pictures as I can.”

I would’ve started crying if I’d let my guard down. It wasn’t just his sweet, considerate remark that made me emotional but the natural way he talked about us always being together. It made me unbearably happy.

My heart was full. I felt like I might start to cry at any moment.

Meanwhile, Kakeru, oblivious to how I was feeling, casually asked, “Have you ever tried fugu before?”

“That’s an unusual question to ask somebody in an aquarium.”

“True. I guess you wouldn’t ask someone if they’d tried grilled mutton at a zoo.”

“Hey, stop joking around.”

We laughed and continued making our way through the aquarium.

“Oh, a jellyfish,” Kakeru remarked a moment later. “It’s glowing blue inside the dark tank. It looks so surreal.”

“Just like the lights from the apartment blocks in Tsukishima…”

When he mentioned the jellyfish, it made me think of our usual walking route.

“You once told me that the way the lights reflected off the water made them look like jellyfish.”

“You asked whether they looked like jellyfish,” he said.

“Did I?”

“Sure did.”

“What are they like?”

“They slowly drift about, swaying and bobbing.”

Kakeru said they felt calming in a way.

“I kind of wish we could live a life as laid-back as that.”

“Is that what you’ve been thinking about?” I asked.

“Yeah. Is that bad of me?”

“No, it’s just so typical of you.”

I rested my head on Kakeru’s shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re having fun,” I said to him.

“Oh, sorry. I must be the only one.”

“No, not at all. I’m enjoying myself, too, so have as much fun as you can.”

“Okay. I’ll try to make a lifetime’s worth of memories today, then!”

“You’ll get in trouble if you try that,” I remarked, and we both laughed.

“Let’s go,” he said, taking my hand. “Oh, there’s a sunfish to our right.”

Kakeru told me the sunfish was bigger than he'd expected.

"Seriously, it's huge! It's gotta be three meters long!"

His reaction was almost as big as the fish. I'd always envisioned sunfish to be flat, but he said it was surprisingly thick. He said it was the only one in the tank.

I imagined it slowly swimming around.

"It says the sunfish is related to the puffer fish. They sometimes injure themselves by rubbing up against the tank, so there's plastic covering the inside of it. Apparently, they're very delicate creatures."

"Don't they die when they're left alone?"

"Oh, that's just a myth. The story is that it's the stress of losing a companion that causes them to die, but that's far from true. They can live a full and healthy life on their own."

"You know a lot about some surprising topics, Kakeru."

"Pretty impressive, huh?"

"…This is just a hunch, but was there an information panel about that?"

"Huh? How'd you know?"

"It sounded like you were reading from a script."

"You caught me," Kakeru replied playfully, and I teasingly bumped him with my shoulder.

I wonder why…

For some strange reason, it made me happy to know that the sunfish, alone in its tank, could live a full life by itself.

The idea of an animal dying from the shock of losing its partner made me feel kind of guilty—probably because, on some unconscious level, I didn't expect to live as long as Kakeru.

"It makes me happy to hear that sunfish are strong enough to survive on their own."

As soon as I said that, Kakeru wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer. I was so surprised that I couldn't help but let out a sound.

"Huh? Wha—?"

"You're going to be okay, Koharu," he said comfortingly. "Smiling scares the bad stuff away."

Changing topics, Kakeru suddenly said, "Oh, you can touch starfish over there. Let's head to the left."

We went to the touch pool, where I got to feel a starfish. It was rougher and bumpier than I expected, and sure enough, it was shaped like a star.

I wouldn't have had the opportunity to learn all these things if it wasn't for Kakeru. I must have said "thank you" a hundred times.

After touching the starfish, we went to see the dolphin show. The dolphins

made energetic, high-pitched sounds. That was something else I wouldn't have known without him.

Once we'd made our way through the aquarium, we received a call from Kakeru's mom.

♪

In a word, Kakeru's mom Kyoko could be described as *powerful*.

The moment I heard Kakeru say, "She's here," Kyoko was already wrapping her arms around me.

"Koharuuu!" she exclaimed. "So *you're* Koharu! Kakeru's told me so much about you! Oooh, you're just as pretty as he said! You look just like a doll!"

I didn't even get the chance to respond, trapped in her one-sided hug.

"Come on, Mom. You're making Koharu uncomfortable."

"Oh, sorry. It's just, Kakeru's never brought a girl home before. I can't help but get carried away!"

"I'm the first?" I asked Kakeru.

"Did you really have to say that, Mom?!" Kakeru cried, sounding flustered.

Next, we climbed into his mother's car and headed to Kakeru's family home.

The place Kakeru had grown up in was a three-bedroom apartment with two rooms near the entrance and a living room at the end of the hallway. This living room had a traditional Japanese-style tatami room next to it.

I got Kakeru to explain the toilet and bath to me in painstaking detail. I was relieved to discover that there weren't many steps to it.

When I sat down at the living room table, I heard Kakeru's mom say, "Take a guess what we're having for dinner tonight."

"How am I supposed to know…?" Kakeru asked, sounding frustrated.

"I wasn't asking you," Kyoko said. "It was a question for Koharu."

"For me?"

"Yeah. Take a random guess."

"Ummm… It's not curry rice, is it?"

"Awww! You're a really great kid, Koharu."

Kyoko wrapped her arms around me again. I was starting to suspect she thought I was a pillow.

"You're giving her way too many hugs," Kakeru said. "What are you praising her for anyway?"

“She not only steered clear of pricey choices like sushi and sukiyaki but went for curry, something that’s easy to prepare! Could her answer be any more perfect? She’s the embodiment of feminine astuteness!”

All I’d done was reply with Kakeru’s favorite dish, but Kyoko saw my response as evidence of remarkable sensitivity. I felt a little bad about that.

“Cut it out, Mom. You’re making her uncomfortable.”

“You know I’m only joking. Sorry, Koharu.”

I waved my hand dismissively in response to Kyoko’s apology.

“I was thinking of making *kawara* soba today.”

“Roof-tile” noodles?

As I was wondering about what that might mean, Kyoko started preparing the meal. I heard the sizzle of something frying and smelled oil, as well as something sweet.

“What kind of a dish is it?”

Kakeru explained that his mom was frying green tea buckwheat noodles on a hot plate.

Apparently, *kawara* soba was a dish where green noodles were cooked on a roof tile, then topped with egg, stir-fried beef, and chopped nori seaweed, and served in a warm, sweet broth. This sweet broth was seasoned with slices of lemon and grated daikon and carrot.

“In the past, every household had a roof tile on hand, and they just so happen to conduct the right amount of heat.”

I was amazed. I’d never known such a dish existed.

“Did people take a tile from the roof of their house to cook with?” I asked. “What if the rain got in?”

I couldn’t help but think that losing a tile from your roof would cause a leak. Did people buy an extra tile just for cooking?

As I was pondering this, I heard laughter.

“Kakeru’s just kidding around,” Kyoko said.

“Wait, what?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Kakeru apologized.

Honestly.

“I’ve served you some. It’s directly in front of you. Your chopsticks are right by your fingertips.”

“Thank you. I can’t wait to try it.” I put my hands together to thank Kakeru’s mom for the meal. That was when I heard Kyoko call out my name.

“Say, Koharu?”

“Yes?”

“Do you want to tie up your hair?”

“Oh, actually, I do!”

“Do you have any hair ties?”

“Sadly not. It didn’t even cross my mind.”

“Will this work?”

“Th-thank you.”

Kyoko had passed me a scrunchie. I gathered my hair together at the back.

“Oh, right,” Kakeru said. “You don’t want your hair getting in your mouth.”

“How is it? Did I tie it up properly?”

He took a look. “It’s perfect!”

Once again, I placed my hands together and said, “Thank you for the food.”

I lifted the noodles with my chopsticks and took a bite.

“This is delicious.”

The smell of the noodles fried in oil melded with the gentle aroma of green tea. The sweetness of the strips of egg and the broth—which was slightly sweeter than noodle soup base—complemented the oil from the noodles, creating an umami flavor. And the refreshing taste of the lemon made me feel like I could keep eating it forever.

“I love the combination of the sweet broth and the lemon.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Kakeru said. “I wish we could get the ingredients in Tokyo.”

“Don’t they sell *kawara* soba in Tokyo?” asked his mom.

Kakeru told her they didn’t, and Kyoko responded with surprise.

“Eat as much as you like,” he said, serving me seconds.

“You’re acting like an old granny from the countryside, Kakeru,” I joked.

“Says you,” he quipped back. His retorts were even quicker than usual that day, which went to show just how happy he was to be home.

“Koharu,” his mom said. “Sorry for asking this out of the blue, but is Kakeru *really* good enough for you?”

That really was *out of the blue.*

“Hey, Mom!” yelped Kakeru.

I was stumped by how to answer. Honestly, I wanted to ask whether *I* was good enough for *him*, but a vague response was the best I could muster.

“Of course. In fact, I feel spoiled.”

“Your smile really makes me feel at ease,” said Kyoko. “Every household needs one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kakeru asked.

“She’s a ‘human washing machine.’ Don’t you know the song?”

Kyoko kept telling me how cute I was, which made me feel all shy and embarrassed.

After dinner, we went in the bath one at a time. Kyoko asked if I wanted to go in with her but I politely declined.

"Do you want to use some face lotion?" she asked.

"Oh, you don't mind?"

"Use as much as you'd like! Drench yourself in it, if you want!"

"Just a little bit is enough."

Kakeru's mom was very considerate toward me, just like Kakeru.

"Do you want me to dry your hair?" he asked. Both he and his mom were going out of their way to pamper me.

"I'm okay."

"Let me dry it for you."

"I can do it myself." I tried to snatch the hair dryer out of Kakeru's hands, but not being able to see made this an impossible feat.

That was when it happened.

"Oh, I meant to say earlier," came Kyoko's voice. "You two can sleep in the tatami room tonight."

"Seriously?" I heard Kakeru say. I thought I heard a gulp.

I'd never actually slept in the same room as Kakeru before. This was also my first time staying over at someone else's house.

When it came to…adult things, I was totally inexperienced. I suspected it was bound to happen one day, after I'd graduated from college and become more independent. Still, I hadn't seen myself naked in years. That made me a bit anxious. I didn't want Kakeru's mom to see me like that, let alone Kakeru. The simple thought of it made my face feel like it was on fire.

"This is kind of embarrassing, isn't it?" I said, testing the waters.

"Oh, uh, yeah," Kakeru replied.

I'd expected him to respond with a joke or something, but now I just wanted to know what sort of expression he was making.

"Don't try any funny business, okay?" I said, trying to lighten the mood with a joke.

"I-if I *did* try something like that, I'd do it the right way." Kakeru sounded extremely serious, which just made me even more embarrassed.

"Do you drink, Koharu?" Kyoko suddenly asked.

But before I could answer, Kakeru replied for me. "Koharu's never had alcohol."

"In that case, you can drink instead," his mom said to him.

After that, we chatted in the living room, and I got Kyoko to tell me stories about Kakeru as a kid.

Kakeru was drinking—or rather, his mom was making him drink. His speech was growing increasingly slurred.

“Koharu, you’re so cute even when you don’t have any makeup on.”

That comment was enough to tell me he was drunk.

“Kakeru? Are you okay?” I asked. “You’re not drunk, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Your voice is cracking.”

“Ahhh, you look so cute in your pajamas. And you’re so cute sitting on the cushion with your legs folded sideways like that.”

“You’re definitely drunk,” I said, finding it funny.

“Leave Koharu with me,” Kyoko told him. “You should go to bed.”

“I’m telling you, I’m fine.”

“I’ll be okay,” I insisted. “Please, go to bed without me. Thank you for everything you did for me today.”

“Hmmm?” murmured Kakeru. “Well, if you say so, Koharu.”

I heard the rustle of his clothes as he stood up. The sliding door opened, then slammed shut. This was followed by the loud *thud* of Kakeru throwing himself onto the futon.

“Sorry about Kakeru,” Kyoko said. “I’m sure he’s already asleep.”

“It’s okay. He helped me out a lot today.”

“Good. Make sure you work him hard.”

“Work him hard?!”

I burst out laughing. I’d never expected to become so close with Kyoko in just a single day.

As I was reflecting on how easy it was to talk to her, she said, “Can I ask you a serious question, Koharu?” Her voice was calm. “Is Kakeru really good enough for you?”

Kakeru was definitely good enough for me—but was I good enough for him? Was an imperfect person like me really good enough? Those anxieties consumed my thoughts. If I kept concealing my feelings and laughing things off, would I be lying to Kyoko?

“On the contrary,” I said, deciding to tell her the truth. “I wonder if I’m really good enough for him.”

Kyoko replied in her usual, lighthearted manner.

“Of course you are. In fact, you’re wasted on him.”

“But I’m blind, and I have chronic health issues.”

“We all get sick at some point. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“I’m still not great at doing the housework. I even struggle with hanging up the laundry.”

“Housework isn’t just a woman’s responsibility anymore. Let Kakeru handle it.”

“My cooking leaves a lot to be desired, too… I’ve only just learned how to

make curry."

"People act like curry's a simple dish you can just throw together, but when it comes down to actually making it, it's a hassle! The fact that you're able to make curry is impressive, Koharu!"

"Also, since I can't see myself naked, I'm uncomfortable with others seeing me like that."

"Beats having loose morals, doesn't it? It's sweet that you're shy!"

Nothing I said seemed to be getting through to her.

"The thing is," I began, "my mom is always looking after me. I'm sure I've caused a lot of problems for her. She makes my dinner every day, goes with me to unfamiliar places, and had to take me to the hospital so many times. Every time my health takes a turn for the worse, I cause her to worry. That's the kind of person I am. Is *that* really good enough for Kakeru? I have a feeling I'll cause a lot of trouble for him—maybe even more than I expect to. He's kind, so I know he'll help me a lot, but it'll be hard on him, too."

What would Kyoko make of this? If your son's girlfriend brings up such a heavy topic, you can't just smile and brush it off. I couldn't see her expression, so the whole situation made me nervous. That was why I'd tried to sound as cheerful as possible.

"Can I ask you something, Koharu?" she asked.

"Oh, s-sure!"

"How can you talk about something so painful with that smile on your face?"

It was only then that I realized the corners of my lips had curled up. I was trying not to bring the mood down too much. I wasn't sad, just worried about Kakeru, and in my attempt to convey that, I'd forced a smile.

"Sorry," Kyoko apologized. "I know it's a hard question to answer."

But I kept going.

"When I was struggling with my illness, my mom would cry. So would my dad. That made me realize I wasn't the only one suffering, so I told myself I'd smile instead. If I smiled and looked like I was happy, it'd make everyone else feel like they were allowed to smile, too. That's how I started to see things."

"Koharu," I heard Kyoko say.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm going to stroke your head."

"Oh, okay."

"Do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

"You're a really great kid."

She stroked my hair, saying “good girl” over and over again.

I felt awkward, but she smelled a little like Kakeru, and my racing heart began to settle.

“You know, Koharu,” Kyoko continued, “you don’t need to push yourself.”

“Oh, no, I’m not.”

“I’m sure Kakeru has no idea all this is weighing on your mind, either.”

“It’s not his problem, though. It’s mine.”

“Asking yourself if you’re good enough and doubting your own self-worth seems like a painful thing to do.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it ‘painful’…”

“I know *I* would find it painful. I’m sure that’s the normal way to feel. Fretting about things like that in your happiest moments… And you never get any answers, either.”

Kyoko didn’t stop there, though—and for that, I was incredibly grateful.

“For what it’s worth, Koharu, I think you’re perfect.”

I could feel myself beginning to tear up.

I’m perfect?

Nobody had ever said anything like that to me before. Warmth started to flood through my chest.

“But… I…”

Oh no.

I was going to cry.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry,” Kyoko said, gently stroking my hair again.

“But…”

“It’s okay.”

“I wanted to reassure you,” I said.

“Don’t worry about that.”

I could feel a hot trail of tears running down my cheeks. When I wiped them away, Kyoko handed me a tissue. Somehow, I managed to stop the tears.

“Feeling a bit better?”

“Yes. I’m sorry about that.”

“Personally,” Kyoko began calmly, “I think Kakeru hit the jackpot with you. You’re cheerful, pretty, and you sound like a real fighter. I’ve always wanted a daughter, and I couldn’t hope for someone better than you.”

I couldn’t take it anymore.

“You think I’m good enough?” I asked, my tears overflowing.

I couldn’t believe how kind Kyoko was.

"Like… Like *this*…?"

As these doubts slipped out of my mouth, she reassured me.

"Of course. I think you're perfect just the way you are. And I'm sure Kakeru truly loves you."

"I'm going to cause him so much worry."

"You know what? If you two get married, I'll be your second mother. I'd be so happy to have you as my daughter, Koharu, regardless of the worries you bring along with you."

I couldn't stop crying. My face felt hot as tears poured from my eyes. Tissues couldn't stem the flow, leaving my hands soaked. My whole body was shaking from my very core, and I let out hiccupping sobs.

I could tell my crying was out of control. I hadn't cried that much in a long time.

"Thank you," I said to Kyoko.

"I'll be here for you," she reminded me, hugging me tight.

What is this feeling?

I wasn't entirely sure…but I was grateful from the bottom of my heart to have met Kyoko.

I woke up in the middle of the night.

After exhausting myself crying, I'd settled down then come to sleep next to Kakeru. When I opened my eyes, though, I could sense that he was gone. I felt around on the futon, but he was nowhere to be found.

Wondering where he could be, I headed toward the living room.

At that moment, I overheard Kakeru and his mom talking. It sounded like they were in another room near the front door.

"Have you bought an engagement ring yet?"

I had a feeling that this wasn't a conversation I was supposed to hear. *I shouldn't eavesdrop*, I thought, beginning to retreat to the room I was sleeping in. But just then, Kakeru said something unexpected.

"A ring? Yeah, I have a ring."

Huh? I found myself frozen to the spot.

"Let me take a look," I heard Kyoko say, followed by a burst of laughter.

"Shhh! You'll wake Koharu!"

"You must've broken the bank to afford a ring like that. You had that much saved up?"

"Cut that out. Well, I have been working part-time."

When Kakeru and I had had our ring sizes measured, I thought we might just gift each other matching rings someday. But apparently, he'd had something else up his sleeve. Something more wonderful than I'd ever

imagined.

I had wondered why he'd started working part-time. Now that I put it together, it all made sense.

I never would have dreamed that he was getting a ring for me. I could feel myself beginning to well up again even though I'd just been crying my eyes out. I didn't want him to catch me sobbing, so I went back to bed.

How could I repay them both for the love they'd shown me? I could spend my whole life telling Kakeru I loved him, and it still wouldn't be enough.

"Try your hardest and keep on smiling."

I suddenly thought back to what my grandmother had once told me.

She was right. All I could do was try hard and keep smiling for the people around me.

So that's what I would do.

"Oh. I forgot to set an alarm for the morning," I whispered to myself, fumbling around in my bag.

When I found my phone and slid my finger across the screen to unlock it, I felt something rough.

What's that? I wondered, rubbing it.

It was the crack I'd made in my phone screen.

The crack from when I'd dropped my phone at Grandma's house.

As I ran my finger along it, an unpleasant feeling took hold of me.

"She can't even keep out of the children's way."

"She'll have a hard time raising kids."

"She might be able to get married, but I doubt she could ever give birth."

"Even marriage would be a challenge. She wouldn't be able to help out with the housework."

My relatives' comments from that day came rushing back.

"It's the truth, though, so what was I supposed to say?"

Dad's response, too.

I felt like I was being strangled by an invisible hand. My heart felt like it was in a death grip.

It hurts. I'm so sad.

The tears that flowed down my face weren't warm, happy tears—but cold ones.

I'd received so much love…

So why was I letting those comments get to me?

Why did I feel so lost?

Try your hardest.

I used those words as a form of encouragement.

Do your best.

I clenched my right hand into a fist and hit my thigh to spur myself on.

Don't give in.

I kept hitting my thigh, over and over again.

You've got this!

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5. A Bridge in the Galaxy

♪

When I returned to Tokyo from Shimonoseki, I deliberated over what to do.

I didn't want to get thrown off course again, so I set my sights on learning to do everything independently. With this goal in mind, I got Mom to teach me even more stuff.

In September, I had my first semester tests, and Kakeru came to campus almost every day to work on his graduation thesis.

He and I were sitting on a bench on the campus lawn. The sun shined brightly, its warmth gradually thawing my body after being chilled to the bone by the air conditioner.

"I think I'd like to start living by myself," I said.

"Huh?" I heard Kakeru exclaim. "Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"I was just thinking that living alone would force me to do everything by myself."

"Well, yeah, but…"

"I want to challenge myself like that, even if it's just for a little while."

I clutched Kakeru's hand tightly.

"I'll be around to help you out. You don't need to push yourself too hard," he said gently.

"But I want to."

"Why?"

"When the time comes for me to leave home, Mom might object and tell me it's too soon. That would really make me feel bad…"

"Your mom says stuff like that?"

"No, she doesn't. Maybe I'm just letting my imagination get the best of me. There's a chance she'd encourage me instead."

I probably felt beholden to her because there were so many things I still hadn't mastered. The only solution was to become independent enough to live on my own.

"Maybe I'll ask if she'd let me."

"Living by yourself, huh…?" Kakeru said. "I'll be cheering you on every

step of the way."

"Thank you."

"I hope I'll get to introduce myself to your dad someday, too."

"Do you want to ask him for my hand in marriage?" I joked shyly.

"Do you want me to?" Kakeru retorted.

I really do, I thought to myself.

"You've got this," he said, giving my hand a squeeze.

♪

When I told Mom what Kakeru had said about meeting Dad, I was surprised to learn that she'd already suggested he meet my boyfriend on multiple occasions. Unfortunately, his responses had been pretty noncommittal.

I decided to broach the topic myself the next time he came home, but the timing never seemed to work out, and before I knew it, it was October.

One Sunday morning, however, Dad was home. We all sat around the kitchen table together.

There was the noise of chopsticks hitting plates, the smell of fried eggs, the aroma of miso soup, and the sound of hot water being poured into a teapot. Something about it all felt so relaxed. I loved Sunday mornings like this.

Dad was a man of few words, so he didn't say much. Mom and I were chatting, more or less the same as we always did. But when Dad was home, there were news shows playing in the background all day long, so you could never forget he was there.

"Do you want more to eat, dear?" Mom asked, but Dad just grunted in response.

Hey, Dad…

Will you meet my boyfriend?

It was a struggle to get my words out. The cold remark he'd once made was suffocating me. I could imagine him making a nonchalant comment like "What's the point in you having a boyfriend?"

Still…

I'd decided to try my best.

"Hey, Dad."

"Yeah?"

"I've learned how to do the laundry by myself."

"Oh."

"I can cook, too. I can make curry and stuff like that."

“Oh,” Dad said again.

His reactions were pretty hard to read, so I was scared to broach the subject.

But I decided to just go for it.

“I have a boyfriend.”

I figured he would just say “Oh” again, but he didn’t. He went quiet.

What kind of face was he making? I couldn’t see it, so I was a little worried that he was mad.

At that moment, Mom swooped in to help.

“What are you so surprised about? Koharu’s at that age. It’s only natural that she’d have a boyfriend.”

“I’m not surprised! I just had something stuck in my throat.”

I heard a slurping sound coming from Dad’s direction.

“His name is Kakeru Sorano. We’ve been dating for over two years now, so I was hoping you’d agree to meet him.”

My hands were trembling. I hid them beneath the table so nobody would see.

“Why would I need to meet him?” he said with a snort.

So that’s how he’s going to react… I felt disheartened but decided to stick with it a little longer.

“I want you to see how great he is, Dad!”

“Give it a break, Koharu,” Dad responded, sounding exasperated. That was when I knew I wasn’t going to get anywhere.

“I’m sure you don’t mind meeting him, right?” Mom asked.

“Don’t you start.”

“Oh, you’re just scared—scared that your beloved Koharu will get snatched away.” Mom was trying to provoke him. “It’s not every day that Koharu shares this much with you. The least you could do is hear her out.”

That argument must’ve swayed him, because Dad let out a deep sigh.

“Fine. But under one condition.”

♪

“So Koharu’s dad agreed to meet me but only if it’s one-on-one?” Kakeru asked.

“That’s right,” said Mom. “I was hoping you could meet him sooner, but the only time that worked out with his schedule was in November, sorry.”

The date and time Dad had set was more than one month after I’d made my request. On top of that, their meeting was scheduled to start late, at eight

in the evening. It went to show how much effort it had taken for Dad to fit Kakeru into his busy schedule.

"I just appreciate him making time for me. But where exactly is it we're going?"

I was in a taxi with Kakeru and Mom. We were all sitting in the back seat, Mom, then Kakeru, then me. Every time the car swerved one way or the other, I'd lean toward Kakeru, or he would lean closer to me. My right side was warm with Kakeru's body heat.

"Koharu's father initially suggested that you meet in the café of a hotel lobby, so I had to twist his arm a bit. 'Come on, this is Koharu's boyfriend you're meeting!' I told him. 'At least treat him to dinner!' He asked me to reserve a table somewhere, so I booked a great restaurant for you both."

Mom sounded pleased with herself.

"I keep forgetting it's just going to be your dad and me," Kakeru said disconcertedly.

"You'll be fine," I told him. "If Mom recommended this restaurant, the food's bound to be good."

"As long as I'm not too nervous to taste anything, that is…"

"You've got this!" I said.

"Yeah. You've got this, Sorano!" Mom chimed in with a laugh.

I got the impression that she was raising her fist, so I punched the air with my left hand and went "Yeah!"

"Nice to see that you're both full of energy…" Kakeru's voice was getting quieter and quieter.

"Are you that scared of my dad?" I asked.

"Well, yeah. When I walked by him in the hospital in Hokkaido, he had this super-stern look on his face."

"Oh, he did?"

"Yes! He looked like an actor from a yakuza movie."

"You think?"

I could hear snickering coming from Mom's direction.

I didn't really think of my dad as someone with an intimidating face, but through Kakeru's eyes, he probably seemed like a demon.

"I mean, what if he says, 'I'll never let you take my Koharu away from me!'?"

"I doubt things would escalate that quickly."

"And then says, 'If you want Koharu, you will have to defeat me!'?"

"What is he, the Demon King?"

"And what if, after all that, he tells me, 'Kakeru, I am your father… You have done well to surpass me…'?"

“Me and you, siblings? That *would* be an unexpected twist.”

“You’re so silly, Sorano,” Mom said, laughing loudly.

I could hear the taxi driver snickering, too. I couldn’t help but giggle.

“Well, if you find yourself in an awkward situation, use that opportunity to order yourself a drink,” suggested Mom.

“I guess I could use alcohol to hide my nerves,” responded Kakeru.

“That’s not what I…,” Mom began—but just then, the driver announced that we’d arrived.

Kakeru and I climbed out of the car. It sounded like Mom had as well, because I heard her ask the taxi driver, “Could you wait just a moment?”

The first words to leave Kakeru’s mouth once he was outside were filled with shock.

“*This* is the restaurant?!”

“What’s the matter?” I asked in a panic.

“It’s a really fancy mansion. Are you sure this is the right place? It looks like somewhere a lord would live.”

“That’s an exaggeration.”

Kakeru’s comment was so over-the-top, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“It’s not an exaggeration! This area’s full of office buildings, so I was convinced the restaurant would be inside one of them, but smack-bang right in the middle of all those towers is this traditional Japanese house.”

If Kakeru’s description was to be trusted, the building’s vast grounds were encircled by a wall with tiled roofs and pine trees peeking over the top. Like many traditional Japanese houses, the building had a gated entrance, which was covered in ivy.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Kakeru hesitantly asked Mom.

“I’m sure,” she replied cheerfully. “I’ve booked a really nice full-course meal for you both, so enjoy.”

I was certain Mom was giving him a thumbs-up.

“S’all fancy… A gen-u-ine high-end Japanese restaurant…”

“Where did that Kansai accent come from?”

“Come on, off you go,” Mom said.

I smiled at Kakeru, and he told me, “I’ll do my best.”

I continued waving and saying “You’ve got this!” until Mom told me Kakeru had gone into the restaurant.

After that, Mom suggested we go home, so we returned to the taxi and headed back to the apartment.

Mom and I were home, chatting in the living room.

“I really hope Sorano makes a good impression.”

“It’s Kakeru. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Well, there’s no use worrying about it. How about we make dinner?”

We went to the kitchen together, and Mom asked me to wash the lettuce.

Kakeru could have been asking Dad for my hand in marriage as we spoke.

But was *I* brave enough to ask Mom the question I wanted to?

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You’re zoning out.”

The faucet made a *squeak* as she turned it off, and the sound of the water flowing came to a stop.

Next, I heard Mom chopping with a knife. She was a much more skillful cook than me, and I knew we got dinner ready quicker when she took the lead.

All of a sudden, something Mom had said came back to me:

“I’ll always be around, so there’s no need to worry.”

What if things went well between Kakeru and Dad, and the two of us wanted to live together in the near future?

I was scared that Mom would say I wasn’t ready.

She’d done so much for me it felt selfish to think that, but I couldn’t shake the fear that she thought I’d never be able to take care of myself.

What if she felt like she needed to come with me so I wouldn’t be a burden on Kakeru? If that happened, I’d probably lose all motivation to keep trying.

Kakeru had been so brave, yet I found myself tongue-tied.

“Dinner’s ready. Let’s set the table.”

“Okay.”

“Could you put the chopsticks out?”

I wanted to be able to do everything by myself, but I knew better than anyone how challenging that would be. I was totally reliant on Mom, and she only let me take care of the simplest tasks.

It was being asked “Isn’t that a little difficult for you?” that scared me the most.

Once we’d put out the food, we sat down at the table. As we were about to start eating, Mom said, “Oh, I almost forgot. Let me tie up your hair.”

I heard her push her chair back.

“Thanks.”

She came and stood behind me, so I gave her the hair tie I was wearing around my wrist.

“I’ve never seen this scrunchie before.”

“It’s new. Kakeru’s mom gave it to me.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” she said, tying my hair up for me.

Now that I thought about it, Mom always tied my hair up at dinnertime. At

Kakeru's house, it hadn't even crossed my mind until his mom asked if I wanted her to do it.

Maybe that was because Mom was the one who did it for me.

For some reason, my chest suddenly felt really cold.

An emotion close to panic seized my heart.

Am I really okay with things staying like this?

I needed to change—both for Kakeru and for myself.

"Hey, Mom."

Mom had sat back down in front of me, and I turned to face her. I couldn't see her, but I could imagine where she was looking.

She was my mom, after all.

I could just tell we were looking each other in the eyes.

Having made up my mind, I spoke to her directly.

"I have something important I want to talk to you about."

*

As I made my way down the wood-paneled corridor, I began to feel extremely out of place.

Whoa! This is so cool! I thought—but when I remembered I was about to meet Koharu's dad, a surge of nervousness coursed through me.

If I could make him approve of our relationship and leave even a bit of a positive impression, that'd be a win in my books.

While I pondered over how to do that, a waitress in a kimono showed me to our table.

"This is the Bellflower Room," she announced, stopping just outside the door.

"Could you wait one moment?" I asked.

The waitress looked confused, but that was the least of my concerns. I was about to meet Koharu's dad. I took a few deep breaths to calm myself down, feeling like a game character restoring their HP before taking on the final boss.

Then I stepped into the room where the boss was waiting.

"Excuse me."

You could cut the tension with a knife. In the center of the tatami room sat a table, and there was a decorative alcove opposite the entrance. Koharu's dad was sitting in the seat of honor. It was the menacing vibes he exuded that were making the atmosphere so unbelievably tense.

"You must be Sorano."

No way. This guy is terrifying… Who wears tinted sunglasses at night?

He was slender, with a face etched deep with wrinkles that served as a testament to the long life he'd lived. He was dressed sharply in a suit, his hair slicked back. Combined with the impression his sunglasses gave off, he looked exactly like an actor from a yakuza movie.

"Th-thank you for agreeing to m-meet with me when you're so busy."

I was so nervous I was stuttering. If Koharu were with me, she would have laughed. Or, maybe not. This was no laughing matter.

"Well, take a seat," her dad said.

I sat down directly across the table from him and bowed my head deeply.

"My name is Kakeru Sorano. I have the honor of dating your daughter."

"I'm Soichiro Fuyutsuki. Thank you for getting along with my daughter."

After briefly introducing himself, Soichiro looked down at the menu.

"…"

"…"

We had nothing else to say to each other.

There was a piece of paper on the table with "Today's Menu" written at the top, but it looked more like a list of ingredients than a menu. Flounder, pomegranate, fresh sea urchin… It was hard to tell what the dishes actually were.

Why was he so quiet? I'd already told him we were dating, so did that mean my mission was complete? Could I spend the rest of my time here eating fancy theme-ingredient dishes in silence? Was this some sort of culinary arts competition?

No. Focus, Kakeru Sorano! Remember what the goal today is!

I pulled myself together and asked Koharu's dad a question.

"Is that another menu?"

"Yeah. It's the drinks menu. Do you drink alcohol?"

"Uh, I do. Only occasionally, though."

Koharu's dad passed me the menu with an offer of "Order whatever you like."

"Are you drinking anything, Dad?"

"*Dad*?"

Oh crap, I thought, but it was too late. Koharu's dad was already giving me a dirty look.

"Sorry."

"Forget it."

"What will you have to drink, Mr. Fuyutsuki?"

"Well, they'll probably give us an aperitif, so let's wait to order until after that."

"Understood!"

Okay. Conversation over.

Ugh. I'm breaking out in a weird sweat.

I could see a garden through the window in the room. The floodlit trees were bright red, their images mirrored on the surface of the pond. Having a garden like that in the middle of the city felt like the pinnacle of luxury. Koi were swimming slowly around in the pond.

For some reason, the Japanese idiom "a koi on a chopping board" popped into my head. It contrasted sharply with the peaceful scenery outside, but the expression seemed to fit my situation perfectly.

As I was caught up in that thought, a stream of waitresses came in and began serving us our dishes.

"Our appetizers for today are flounder, pomegranate, fresh sea urchin…"

They explained each dish as they placed it in front of me. I recognized the ingredients, but I had no idea what the dishes were actually supposed to be. Once five small plates, each containing only a single mouthful of food, were lined up in front of me, the waitresses left again.

Huh? Is that it?

Did meals get smaller the more luxurious they were? Someone had put their heart and soul into these morsels of food. Was I going to demolish them all in just five bites? *That's crazy,* I thought, glancing at the menu. There were still a lot of courses to come: starter, soup, sashimi, simmered, grilled…

Were they going to bring out new dishes every time I finished eating? Part of me was freaked out by the prospect. I felt as if I was being treated like a king.

"No need to hold back. Go ahead and eat," Koharu's dad said.

I put my hands together and gave my thanks for the food.

All of the dishes were better than anything I'd ever eaten before. This high-end restaurant didn't disappoint. Was it the quality of the ingredients? The way they seasoned them? Both aspects were probably top-notch. Either way, the food was on a whole different level.

Koharu's dad, meanwhile, ate in silence, his expression impossible to decipher.

"Is it good?" he asked, glaring at me. His tone sounded half like a threat.

"Yes. Thank you. I've never tasted such delicious food before!"

It was the truth. I'd never had a meal this good.

"This place is the real deal," murmured Koharu's dad.

"…"

"…"

An awkward silence fell between us.

"…Yeah," I responded, unsure of how else to reply.

Are you there, Koharu? Are you there, Koharu's mom? I silently pleaded, gazing up at the ceiling.

Like a message from above, her mom's words suddenly came rushing back to me:

"If you find yourself in an awkward situation, use that opportunity to order yourself a drink."

"Would you mind if I ordered a drink, Mr. Fuyutsuki?"

"Do as you please."

"I should probably have sake, since this is a Japanese restaurant."

Koharu's dad didn't respond, so I called the waitress over to order.

"One bottle of sake, please."

"How many cups would you like?" she asked.

"How many?" I repeated, glancing at Koharu's dad.

"Get two."

Mr. Fuyutsuki continued eating in silence. He gave off the impression that he was having dinner alone.

However, that changed a bit when our sake arrived.

"Come on, let's have a drink!"

Koharu's dad gulped down the sake I'd poured for him, his face turning red almost immediately.

"I think we may have met before, Sorano," he said suddenly.

"Oh, yes, we have. We crossed paths in the hospital in Hokkaido once."

"Ah, that's right. Sorry you had to travel all the way to Hokkaido."

"It's fine. It was the least I could do."

"I want you to eat your fill of good food tonight. I know it might sound a little weird, but this is my way of showing thanks."

Koharu's dad broke apart the simmered golden eye snapper, then soaked a big piece in sauce and took a bite. He followed it up with another swig of sake.

I ate some, too. I'd never tasted any simmered fish this delicious before.

"You like it?" he asked.

"Yes, it's fantastic!"

"You need to try some of this meat as well, Sorano."

So *this* was what a full-course meal was all about. I'd had plenty of small dishes, sashimi, simmered fish, and other boiled delicacies, so by the time the meat course arrived, I was already stuffed—and there was still more to come. We had a choice of a mini tempura rice bowl, a mini seafood rice bowl, or rice porridge to finish up the main meal, then they would bring in dessert. I couldn't help but wonder if we were being fattened up so *they* could devour *us*. That was just how much food there was.

Strangely, though, I felt like I could keep eating the steak in front of me forever. It was so tender you hardly needed to chew, and every bite burst with meaty juices. The Wagyu was exquisite, especially paired with salt and wasabi. All I could think about was how delicious it was as the strong scent of wasabi lingered in my nose. I would have happily eaten that steak again the next day. And the next.

"Where did you end up finding a job, Sorano?"

"Oh, right. At a logistics company…"

As I was telling him about my job, Koharu's father said, "Logistics is the backbone of any enterprise. That'll be a good place for you to learn the ropes. I do business with that company myself."

"Hm? You do?"

"The people there seem very good-natured."

"Whoa, that's good to know."

"In that sense, you should fit right in," he said with a smile.

What?! A smile?! I thought, staring. If he really was a yakuza movie character, it was the kind of expression you expected him to make after catching a rival organization in a trap.

Damn. He even looks tough when he smiles.

"Don't grin at me like that, Dad," I said.

The lighter atmosphere had made me feel like I could open up a bit…but apparently he still refused to let me call him "Dad."

"You have no right to call me that!" he shouted.

I regretted that slip of the tongue, but at the same time, I couldn't help but feel mildly amused by his reaction. *Oh…there it is*, I thought to myself. It was such a classic thing for any father with a daughter to say.

He was visibly tipsy, his face flushed red. He staggered to his feet and pointed at me.

"Listen here, Sorano!"

"O-okay!"

"For the sake of argument, I approve of you dating Koharu! But you'd better not be thinking about marriage!"

"I am! I'm thinking very seriously about it!"

"You're lying!"

"I'm not!"

"Why Koharu?!"

"Because she's a really wonderful person!"

"Argh!" exclaimed Koharu's dad, raising his voice. "Anyway! *Anyway!* I will *never* let you marry her!"

At that moment, I heard a chorus of voices say "Thank you for waiting,"

and a stream of waitresses entered the room. When they saw Koharu's dad on his feet, their eyes widened in astonishment. He darted his eyes about, looking somewhat uncomfortable, then quietly sat back down.

Something about this scene felt so familiar. It reminded me of that awkward moment when a staff member walked into your karaoke booth right in the middle of a song. It must be rough…experiencing that level of embarrassment in a high-end restaurant.

After bashfully sitting himself down, Koharu's dad planted his face on the table and fell asleep.

Koharu's dad slept for an hour, although he did get up a few times to go to the restroom.

While he was asleep, a waitress came in to take away our food. I apologized to her, but she said, "We can make a special exception for Mr. Fuyutsuki, so let him get some rest," and let us stay past our allotted time.

"I… I dozed off?" he asked once he finally woke up.

"Oh, you're awake? The meal's over."

"Did I…do anything embarrassing while I was asleep?"

"Anything embarrassing…?" I began. "Well, nothing major—but you did throw up a lot in the restroom."

"I—I see."

"And you fell asleep in the hallway when I took my eyes of you for a second."

"Ah… Whoops."

"And the best part? You tried to dive into the pond, saying you were going to cook the koi yourself. It was hard work stopping you."

Koharu's dad fell silent and buried his face in his hands.

After a moment, he asked incredulously, "Are you telling the truth?"

"Why would I lie about something like that?"

Koharu's dad grabbed hold of the damp towel resting on his forehead.

"I can't imagine why you'd go to such lengths to take care of me, Sorano."

"Why wouldn't I?" I decided to be frank with him. "I love Koharu. As selfish as it is, I want you to like me, too."

Koharu's dad shifted his posture, sitting cross-legged as he loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top of his shirt.

"I see," he murmured pensively. It sounded like he was turning things over in his mind. After a short pause, he added, "You must really care about Koharu."

"Well, yes."

"And you're sure you want to be with her?" Even though he was still

drunk, he shot me a piercing look.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"Koharu can't see."

For a moment, I was too stunned to speak. It was such an obvious thing to say that "So what?" felt like the only appropriate response. I quickly changed my mind, though. He seemed to be testing my resolve, so I spelled it out for him.

"I am aware. I'm used to it by now."

"Wouldn't it be better for you to choose someone healthier?"

"Koharu asked me the same question three years ago, Dad."

"For the last time, I'm not your dad," he grumbled.

Mr. Fuyutsuki suddenly started coughing. I handed him a teacup, and he gulped down some cold tea.

"What's wrong with calling you 'Dad'?"

He snorted. "You don't realize how hard things will be for you. She could get sick again at any time."

"I could get sick at any time, too."

"What I'm trying to say is, she's more at risk than other people."

Koharu's dad let out a deep sigh. Something about that sigh made me mad. He was only focusing on the negatives.

"What's all this about? Koharu has so many positive qualities! She's always smiling, she jokes around with me, and she's strong enough to overcome any obstacle that stands in her way, rather than just putting up with it. Please don't speak badly about her. She's your daughter!" Realizing how heated I'd gotten, I hastily apologized. "Sorry. I didn't mean to get carried away."

He turned to look at me, his eyes wide with surprise.

"You get angry on Koharu's behalf," he said softly. "That's something I've never been able to do."

"Koharu… She saved me. I used to spend all my time tiptoeing around other people, being totally passive, but since meeting her, I've started to change for the better. When someone like her enters your life, you can't help but feel like it's destiny. That's why…she's the person I want to be with."

Koharu's dad chuckled. "Destiny, huh…? Come to think of it, I felt the same way when I met Haruka."

Haruka. That must be Koharu's mother.

Creases formed under Soichiro's eyes as his face broke into a cheerful smile.

"Well, if you're the man Koharu chose, I have no choice but to give you my blessing," he declared, before suggesting we have another cup of sake.

“I think we’d better call it a night…”

“Surely you know the importance of two men exchanging cups of sake.”

There was still some left in the bottle, so he split it between us.

“Make Koharu happy,” he said, downing it in one gulp.

♪

I’d told Mom I had something to discuss, but it took me a while to get the words out.

I agonized over what to say. Since I couldn’t see her reaction, I felt pressured to get it over with quickly.

“Koharu? What’s wrong?”

Mom’s concerned tone prompted me to just come out and say it.

“I…” Slowly, I started to articulate the things I’d been turning over in my mind. “I’d like to get married to Kakeru one day.”

“Well, of course you do.” Mom sounded delighted. “I thought you would. I have no objections. In fact, I’m all for it.”

I could tell that Mom was excited to have Kakeru as part of the family. It made me happy that she’d accepted my choice so readily. It seemed like Mom really trusted me, which made me feel all warm inside.

She really likes Kakeru, I thought—but then Mom said something that took me by surprise.

“If you move in with Kakeru, I guess I’ll have to come, too. I asked him whether he wanted to move in here a little while ago, but it would be too cramped. I wonder if there are any places that might be a little bigger.”

Her voice sounded so kind and caring.

I should’ve known she’d say that.

I touched the scrunchie Mom had used to tie up my hair. She always put me first, making sure I didn’t struggle or trip over anything. But that wasn’t the future I wanted.

“Mom,” I said clearly. “I want to try living independently.”

She didn’t answer.

“You’ve supported me and helped me in so many ways, and there’s still so much I can’t do by myself, but I’m going to have to learn to be independent someday.”

I pressed on.

“So…I need you to support my decision.”

After a short pause, I heard her say my name.

“Koharu…”

My thoughts were all over the place. Even I realized that.

Unusually for me, the words I was trying to express melted in my mouth like cotton candy, disappearing before I could get them out.

I must have been scared. Becoming independent from my mother scared me.

And yet…

"I…"

There was something else I felt obliged to say.

"When I have kids, I want to be able to take care of them myself. I want to be able to do all the household chores, too. If my child starts running around, I want to be able to catch them and tell them not to run. I want to be able to take the initiative and offer to help out at family gatherings."

I hesitated for a moment. I was afraid Mom would dismiss my ambitions as unrealistic or insist on handling everything herself.

Why had Mom always been there to support me? The idea of confronting that reason filled me with fear. It would be like being told "You'll never be able to stand on your own two feet," which terrified me.

The words "I'm sorry" tumbled from my lips. I must have genuinely wanted to apologize to her.

"I know it must hurt to hear me say that I want to do things by myself after all the support you've given me. But if I can, I want to try and live my life without your help."

Mom didn't say anything. She just reached out and took my hand.

She covered it with hers, gently stroking the back of my hand with her thumb. I could hear her sniffling. Although I couldn't see her, I figured her eyes were probably red. I started to tear up as well.

"This must have been tough on you, Mom. I've caused so much trouble for you. So I'll do the best I can."

"No," Mom replied. Then, in a gentle voice, she added, "I never thought it was tough."

"But I caused you so much trouble," I insisted.

"Not really. You were always easy to take care of."

My eyes began to sting.

Easy?

That had to be a lie.

There wasn't a child more troublesome than me.

"But I was constantly getting sick. I lost my sight. You had to do so much for me."

"It never once felt like a burden, though," Mom said.

"You had to come with me to the hospital so many times! You helped me

learn braille and even taught me all the ins and outs of how to use the screen reader on my phone! That must have taken a huge toll on you…"

"No."

But Mom wasn't going to back down.

"I never thought it was hard."

Her kind words were as light as always, like the wings of a bird.

"I never thought you were any trouble at all. Did you think you were?"

It sounded as if she was whispering right in my ear.

As she was gently rubbing my back, she offered me some words of comfort.

"I wouldn't trade the blessing of having a child for anything. Waking up every morning to prepare your meals, eating together, waving you good-bye, and hearing about your day when you came home… Do you have any idea how happy those moments made me? The time I've spent with you means the world to me as a mother. Please don't ever say you caused me any trouble."

After that…

How could I not cry after hearing something like that?

I'd caused her so much stress! Yet she still held me close, showering me with words of kindness.

On some level, I must have felt guilty about what I'd put her through, so those were the words I'd been longing to hear.

I felt the pit of my stomach twist, and a strange sound escaped my throat. I couldn't hold my tears back anymore. I tried to wipe them away with the palms of my hand, but it was no use. I couldn't keep up.

"Do you realize how blessed I am to be your mother?" Mom continued. "If you say you want to push yourself even harder, I'm obviously going to support you."

As she said that, Mom held me by the shoulders.

Tears kept streaming down my face, making it hard for me to speak.

"But you were talking about living with us."

"Don't be silly," Mom said, stroking my hair. "I didn't say that because I don't believe in you. I said it because I worry about you."

Mom!

I couldn't take it any longer. I leaned my head against her chest and sobbed.

"If anyone can do this, it's you. I know you can. You just have to work hard!" Mom stroked my head as she spoke. "But there's one thing I have to tell you, Koharu."

"Mm?"

"The truth is, I'll be a little lonely without you." She sounded like she was

getting emotional. “I know you’ll be fine, but I’ll be here whenever you need me.”

Mom supported my choice.

I can do this, I thought.

I’m going to become a proper adult—someone who’s capable of anything.

I’ll work so hard that one day, people will be amazed at all the things I can do even though I can’t see.

But just for today, I’ll let myself be spoiled by Mom.

♪

Once Mom and I had finished our dinner, I got a call from Kakeru.

He was leaving the restaurant with Dad and asked if we would pick them up.

Mom and I climbed into a taxi and headed to the restaurant. When we got there, he and my dad had their arms around each other.

“Would you look at that!” Mom laughed as she described the scene to me.

“We should go to Ginza, Sorano!” Dad was saying loudly. “I’ll show you how grown-ups have fun!”

“Sure you will,” Mom said amusedly. “You’d probably fall asleep right away, dear, even with Kakeru around. You know you can’t hold your liquor.”

“I can, too! I used to drink a whole one-point-eight liter bottle of sake all by myself!”

“‘Used to’ being the key words. Things must have been *very* different in your past life.”

I could hear Mom gently chiding Dad.

“Sorry we took so long, Koharu,” Kakeru said to me.

“Sorry about Dad. I hope he wasn’t too hard on you.”

“Not at all. In fact, *I* should be the one apologizing for letting him drink too much,” Kakeru said in that kind voice of his.

“We’re going in the taxi now, dear,” I heard Mom say exasperatedly. “Honey! No lying down in the back seat!” Her voice was quickly getting angrier.

“Doesn’t look like there’s any room for me,” Kakeru said.

Mom’s voice drew closer.

“Sorry about him. That silly husband of mine lay down in the back of the cab and fell asleep. Let me call you another taxi.”

“Oh, that’s okay. We can walk home. That way, we can still enjoy our usual nighttime stroll. Is that okay with you, Koharu?” Kakeru asked.

“Of course,” I replied.

“Take care, then,” said Mom.

She got into the taxi with Dad and headed home.

“Okay, let’s get going.”

With that, we set off into the night.

Kakeru and Dad had met for dinner in Shintomicho. He suggested we follow the promenade along the Sumida River, cross Tsukuda Bridge, and from there take our usual route home.

It was November, so the nights were chilly. I could detect a hint of winter in the sea breeze. The icy scent made the inside of my nose tingle.

“The ground’s covered in leaves from the cherry trees, so be careful you don’t slip,” Kakeru said, guiding me where it was easier to walk. “Oh wow. The leaves on the cherry trees along the promenade have turned yellow and red. It really feels like fall.”

He described the scenery without me having to ask. Thanks to Kakeru, I was able to picture myself walking down a path of vibrant fall leaves.

In my mind, the dark surface of the Sumida River lay to my right, while an avenue of autumnal cherry trees stretched out before me. The city lights gave the leaves a vibrant glow. To my left, Kakeru was walking beside me, dressed in the suit he’d worn to meet my father.

“I really love cherry trees,” I remarked.

“Don’t tell me you want to plant a cherry tree with your friends someday,” Kakeru said, a hint of laughter in his voice.

“Hm? Why do you say that?”

“Last time, it was fireworks. I wouldn’t be surprised if planting cherry trees was your next suggestion.”

“No, that’s not what I was going to say!” I said, laughing.

I had always liked cherry trees.

“They’re the kind of trees that go through life with you, never leaving your side.”

“They are?”

“In spring, they burst into full bloom, as if to celebrate the arrival of the season. In summer, they grow resilient leaves to resist the heat. In autumn, their leaves turn red, bringing warmth and color to the peaceful season. And in winter, they stand strong, enduring the biting cold alongside you. They’re always there for you, no matter where you are.”

I looked up at the sky, envisaging the cherry trees I couldn’t see. The scene of cherry blossoms in all four seasons unfolded before me.

“That’s why I like cherry trees.”

“Tokyo seems to have more cherry trees than anywhere else, doesn’t it?”

Kakeru suddenly went still.

"When spring arrives in Tokyo, the riversides are always covered in cherry blossoms."

It sounded like he was deep in thought.

"Staying by someone's side and supporting them through everything sounds like a simple task, but it's not as easy as it seems. You can only do it if you make a conscious effort."

I figured that was his way of telling me he was making the effort.

Kakeru was always there for me.

In that moment, it dawned on me: Kakeru was like my own cherry tree that would endure the seasons by my side. An image of a cherry tree in full bloom popped into my head.

I threw myself around Kakeru's left arm, which I'd been holding with my right hand. This sudden embrace seemed to take him by surprise, because he let out a yelp.

"Whoa."

It was a quiet night. There was almost no noise, aside from the occasional passing car. In a city that's usually filled with sound, this silence made it feel like we were in our own little world.

"Hey, Koharu. Let's stop for a moment."

Kakeru abruptly stopped walking.

"What's wrong?"

"This is amazing. There are no lights from the buildings or apartments tonight, so there's no translucent film in the night sky. You can see the stars."

Huh? What's he talking about?

"A translucent…film?"

Kakeru chuckled and said, "I knew you'd laugh at that." He then proceeded to explain the concept of this "translucent film."

When he looked up at the night sky in Tokyo, he always felt that the city lights created a sort of film that obscured the stars from view. The night sky felt oppressive, as if there was no chance of escape. That was how he described it to me.

"Who knew that a little later in the evening, the stars got the chance to shine?" he mused.

"Hey, Kakeru," I said.

"Yeah?"

"What did you talk about with Dad?"

"Uhhh, well…"

He seemed unsure of what to say, so I filled him in on my night instead.

"I told Mom that I wanted to marry you and asked if she'd let me live on

my own. Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, though," I said, smiling.

"Not at all. That makes me really happy. I asked your dad for your hand in marriage."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah."

"And what did he say?"

"Eventually, he said yes."

No way. Dad had given us his blessing.

"Mom was supportive of my choice, too."

"Oh, that's good to hear."

"Still, I was thinking… Aren't we doing things the wrong way around?"

"Huh?"

"Don't act so surprised," I said.

Usually, we'd get engaged first, then ask our parents for their blessing.

"Make sure you propose properly to me someday."

I was a little embarrassed he'd made me say that, so I quickly said, "Come on, let's go."

Kakeru's reaction came as a shock.

"Forget 'someday'— I'll do it now."

He came to a stop.

It was so sudden, my heart felt like it was beating out of my chest.

Did he say 'now'?

"Are you ready, Koharu?"

"What? Right now?"

"Yes. Right now."

His voice sounded gentle. I loved it when he spoke like that.

"I need a moment to mentally prepare myself…"

Kakeru grabbed me by the shoulders. Apparently, he was standing directly in front of me.

"Can you picture something for me?"

"Okay."

Kakeru expanded my world in the same way he always did.

I might not be able to see any longer, but he was always by my side acting as my eyes, showing me a world of endless possibilities.

I closed my eyes and imagined.

"It's already gone dark. We're on Tsukuda Bridge. There's no one around but us. Below, the starry sky and the full moon are reflected on the surface of the Sumida River. The bridge looks like it's floating in the middle of the galaxy. At the very top of that bridge, I kneel down in front of you."

As he spoke, Kakeru took me by the hand.

It felt just like we were in outer space and Kakeru was holding my hand like a prince.

"I take something out of my pocket and put it on your finger."

I felt something cold slide down my ring finger.

"Is that a ring?"

I touched it just to check, then let out an exclamation of surprise.

"What's wrong?" Kakeru asked.

"Nothing. It's just, this ring…has a really big stone in it."

"It does. Right now, there's a huge, ten-carat diamond ring on your left hand."

"Ten carats? That's way too extravagant."

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. Ten carats seemed over the top, but it was enormous—so enormous, in fact, that even I could tell how big it was. How had he managed to buy me a ring like this? Even just the idea that he'd bought it for me filled me with warmth.

"Picture it. The lights of the galaxy are reflected in the diamond, making it sparkle."

I held up my left hand and pictured the scene. The ring on my finger reflected the galaxy like a kaleidoscope.

"Wow…it's so pretty."

I may not have been able to see, but in that moment, I knew nothing in the world could shine brighter.

"I've been carrying it around with me whenever we're together so I could propose to you at any time."

"I had no idea." My eyes began to sting, and my heart swelled.

"Hey, Koharu."

"Yes?"

I felt like a princess as Kakeru asked me:

"Will you marry me?"

I had no reason to say no, of course—but I couldn't bring myself to accept right away.

"You're sure I'm good enough?" I asked.

"You're perfect."

"You know I can't see, right?"

"I'm pretty sure you've told me that before."

"And you know I'm quick to get jealous?"

"What's wrong with that? It's cute."

"And I'm more naive than you'd assume."

"Now, *that* might be an issue…," Kakeru joked, before adding, "I think I said I'd use this opportunity to tell you all the things I love about you."

He spoke smoothly and without faltering in a clear voice.

"I love how you always try your hardest and keep on smiling."

And that wasn't all.

"You're kind to others. You have a nice voice. You're soft and gentle, yet you work so hard. You're always grateful for what you have. You're polite. You're determined. We share the same sense of humor, and your affection for me never fades. Those are the things I love about you," Kakeru said, before jokingly adding, "Oh, that ended up being eleven things."

He kept going.

"When I'm with you, Koharu, it gives me the motivation to keep trying and keep smiling, too. You're perfect in every sense of the word."

I felt like a warm embrace was enveloping my heart.

Was it okay to be this happy? A powerful urge surged up from deep inside me.

"Kakeru…"

"Yeah?"

"Hug me."

I wanted him to embrace my body, as well as my heart.

Kakeru pulled me close, wrapping me tightly in his arms. I wished we could melt into each other and become one. His hug filled my heart with so much joy, it spilled out in the form of tears.

"Thank you. That was the most wonderful proposal."

Thank you for giving me this happiness. Thank you for coming into my life.

I was overflowing with gratitude.

"Promise me one thing," I said.

"What is it?"

"No matter how difficult or troublesome I might be, don't ever hate me—not even for a second. I want you to keep loving me, no matter what."

Without his love, I wouldn't be me anymore. That was honestly how I felt.

"Koharu?" Kakeru began, his voice gentle. "That'll be a piece of cake. So don't worry."

With those kind words, he gave me another squeeze.

"Promise me. Promise me," I repeated as tears flowed from my eyes.

Surrounded by that galaxy of stars, I melted into Kakeru's warmth.

6. Kyoko Sorano

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The large church doors swung open, and young Koharu, dressed in white, and her father took a bow. Majestic organ music stirred, and they slowly began to make their way down the bright red aisle.

In her wedding dress, Koharu looked just like an angel from heaven.

After I got divorced, Kakeru's smiles became forced.

He became the kind of boy who tiptoed around people, distancing himself from them and refusing to show his true feelings.

Naturally, as a parent, this was painful to watch. I blamed myself for it. I tried to be as approachable as possible, but he never opened up to me.

When Kakeru said he wanted to go to college in Tokyo, I hadn't been able to unravel his intentions. As his mother, that should have been my job. I thought he probably wanted to get out of town, but it made me sad that that was the only reason I could come up with. It came as a crushing blow when he told me "I don't want to be a burden to you, Mom."

As we were driving to Kitakyushu Airport on the day of his big move, he and I discussed his future. It was only when he said, "I think I'll find a job in Tokyo," that it finally sunk in that he was leaving me for good. I was over being sad, so instead, I chose to let Kakeru enjoy his freedom. He was an adult, after all.

Waving him good-bye at the departure gate felt like our final farewell.

As his mom, it hurt that I hadn't been able to give him everything he'd wanted. At the very least, I wanted to make sure he didn't have to struggle financially. I began to feel that was the only thing I *could* do for him.

Then one day, it all changed.

He started calling me up for advice.

Kakeru wasn't the type of boy to say things outright, but when I pieced together the fragments of information he gave me, I realized he'd fallen in love with a girl who was ill. It didn't seem like he was coming to me for motherly advice but just wanted guidance from someone with more life experience. The situation was too much for him to handle on his own. Either way, I was delighted that he'd decided to reach out to me after so long.

A short time later, he announced that he had a girlfriend. In the end, he and the girl he'd asked for advice about had started dating.

Truthfully, I was surprised that he was sharing something like that with me. When he told me the news, he also mentioned that his girlfriend was blind. I figured he was hoping for my approval.

They'd only just started dating, but he was making sure to keep me in the loop, which went to show how sincere Kakeru really was.

To be perfectly honest, I was taken aback when I first heard his girlfriend was blind. This was a decision he'd made, so I put on a brave face and supported him, but internally, I couldn't help but worry.

Would it be okay? Why had he chosen her? Didn't he have the option of dating a normal girl?

I didn't know her, but those disrespectful thoughts still crossed my mind.

However, after Kakeru started going out with her, I noticed a marked change come over him.

He rarely sounded depressed over the phone anymore, and sometimes, I even heard him laugh. He started telling me things about himself, too.

The girl who'd changed him for the better was named Koharu.

I wanted to meet her.

I was curious to find out what she was like.

If Kakeru were to get married, I wanted him to be with someone he felt at ease with. To me, that was the most important thing.

I was genuinely touched when Kakeru eventually brought Koharu home. *Oh, he's found a real gem,* I thought.

Koharu must have endured a great deal of hardship, but it was those experiences that had shaped her into the thoughtful, smiling person she was.

Like a diamond, she'd refused to let her harsh, unyielding surroundings dull her shine, which gave her smile an extraordinary sense of dignity. That was the impression I got of her.

I knew Kakeru would be able to build a happy family with Koharu by his side.

Koharu put all my worries to rest. A sense of relief washed over me, leaving me feeling content.

When Kakeru brought Koharu to Shimonoseki, he told me he wanted to marry her.

I immediately gave him my blessing. I was happy to entrust the person I cared about the most to Koharu. I had no doubts whatsoever.

At the same time, I wondered whether there was anything I could do to help. That was when the diamond my mother-in-law had given me came to mind.

"Have you bought an engagement ring yet?"

When I asked Kakeru that question, he admitted that he had. He'd saved up his wages from his part-time job to get Koharu a designer ring from a luxury brand. Decorated with melee diamonds, it was more of a fashion accessory than an engagement ring.

"Koharu can't see, so ideally I wanted to get her a ring with a diamond big enough for her to feel. I guess, if I work as hard as I can, maybe I can get her one for our tenth anniversary or something," Kakeru said with a laugh.

Before he went to college, Kakeru never would have talked to me about something like that. He would have agonized over it in private, then given up without getting anyone's input.

Meeting Koharu had been a miracle for him.

"Don't be silly. Why didn't you ask me for advice?"

That was how I responded.

I took something out of the drawer and showed it to Kakeru.

"A necklace?"

"It belonged to my late mother-in-law. Your grandmother. She gave it to me as a wedding gift."

"I never knew you had that. Didn't she ask for it back?"

"She and I got on well, so she told me to keep it."

My mother-in-law seemed sad when Kakeru's father and I got divorced. I could remember her tearfully telling me to take good care of Kakeru like it was just yesterday.

"The diamond in it is huge."

Kakeru held the stone in the necklace up to the light and stared at it.

"I'm giving it to you," I told him.

"Huh? Where'd that come from?"

"I want you to remove the diamond, have it made into a new ring, and give that to Koharu."

"You're sure?"

"Of course. I'm already entrusting her with the one thing I love the most. She may as well have my second most prized possession."

Kakeru asked what the first thing was, but I refused to answer, telling him it was a secret.

Thinking back, I remembered deciding I would give the necklace to Kakeru's future wife when my mother-in-law told me to take good care of him. When Kakeru mentioned wanting to get her a diamond big enough for her to feel, I could see how instinctively he cared for her. It was in that moment that the necklace had come to mind.

Sometime later, Kakeru told me he'd had a ring made out of the necklace and proposed to Koharu with it.

"She was so happy," Kakeru said cheerfully, and I could feel my heart swell with joy.

The priest stood in front of the stained-glass window, reading out the wedding vows.

"Do you take Kakeru to be your lawful wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health?" It was a vow I'd failed to uphold.

"Yes, of course!" Koharu responded, her voice light and cheerful.

Next, the priest turned to Kakeru and asked him the same question.

"I do," he said.

"You may now exchange rings."

For the ring exchange, Koharu had said she wanted to use that ring.

The large diamond shined so brightly I could see it from my seat.

I could only hope that their future would be just as bright. I wanted their life together to be so wonderful that you could see it shine from afar.

If that were the case, I could stay in Shimonoseki without any worries. It was a thought that made me feel warm inside.

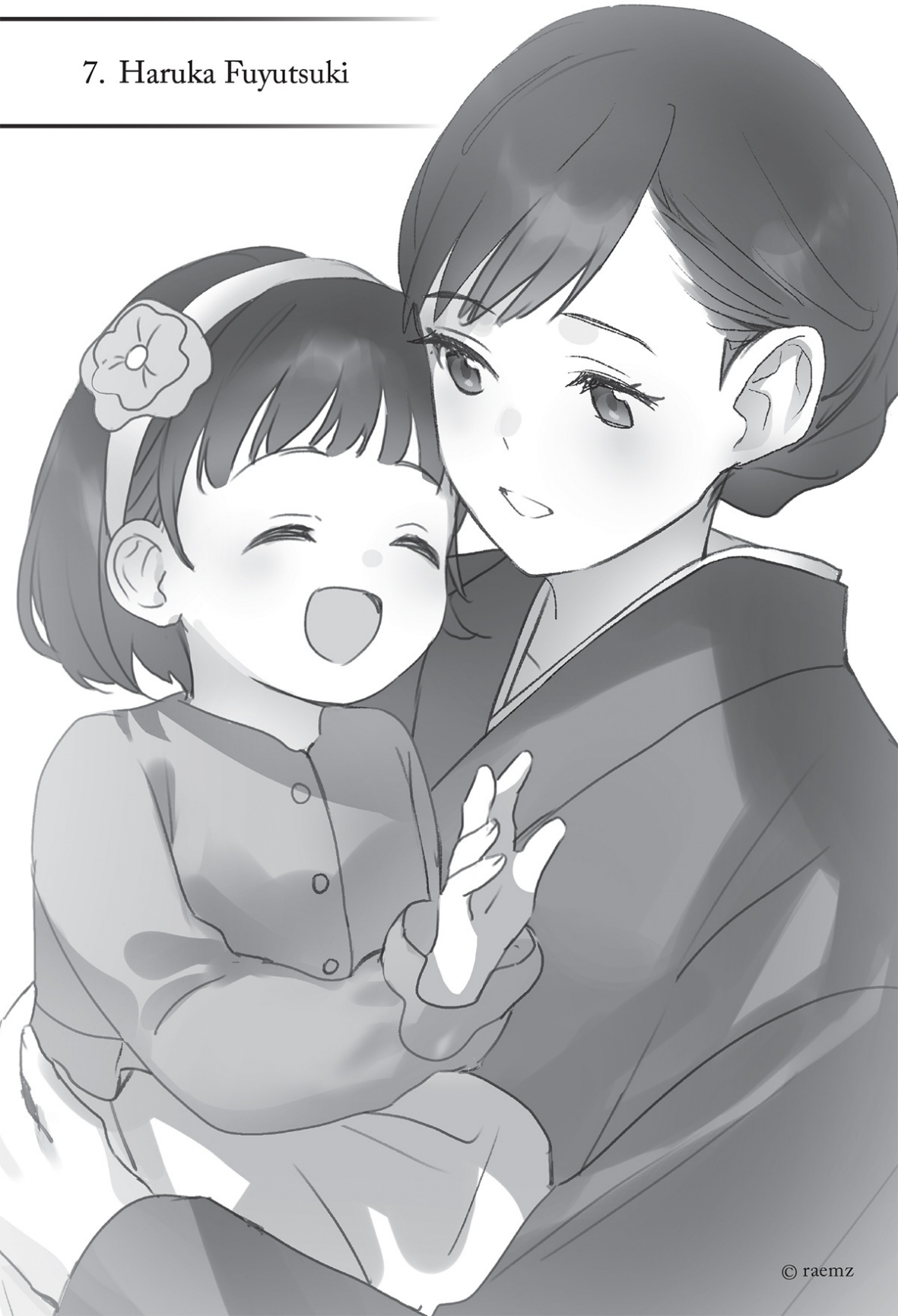
Kakeru slipped the diamond ring onto Koharu's ring finger.

She smiled, and he smiled back.

There was nothing forced about his smile anymore. He looked truly happy.

When I saw that smile, I started to weep uncontrollably, the tears pouring down my cheeks.

7. Haruka Fuyutsuki



When Koharu got cancer, I blamed myself.

I thought my heart would break when they said there was a chance she'd lose her sight. Still, for as long as Koharu was alive, I would desperately try to carry out my responsibilities and do everything I could for her.

After I found out about a type of traditional Chinese medicine that was effective at fighting cancer, I took her straight to the specialist. After I heard about superfoods that were good for your sight, I ordered them from wherever I could.

But our efforts were in vain. That cursed disease stole the light from Koharu's eyes.

When Koharu lost her sight, I decided to dedicate the rest of my life to caring for her. It felt like the natural way to atone.

I'm sorry, I always thought around her.

I was sorry that I hadn't given her a strong body. Despite that, I probably acted out the role of a "cheerful mother," trying not to let my guilt show.

But seeing Koharu here today made me feel like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

Around fifty people had come for the wedding reception, and they were all congratulating the happy couple. Although she couldn't see, Koharu looked really happy as she cut the wedding cake and took the first bite. Just seeing her smile filled my heart with joy.

Wearing her pink wedding dress, Koharu stood in the spotlight at the center of the room.

You're so pretty, and I'm so sorry for taking away your light.

I was plagued by these thoughts all over again.

"Dear Mom."

Koharu started reading out her letter to me. I stood next to her father, listening to her words.

She couldn't actually read the letter, so she'd memorized the whole thing.

“I’m sure things have always been difficult for you.

“I’ve apologized for that before. You’ve helped me with so much because of my blindness, but despite all that, I insisted I wanted to become as independent as possible and asked that I could live alone. That’s why I felt the need to apologize.

“In your comforting voice, you told me not to worry.

“You gave me your support, encouraging me and Kakeru to live a happy life together.

“I want to be that kind of mother, too.

“I hope Kakeru and I can become parents.”

“Koharu…,” my husband said by my side, sobbing.

He was crying harder than anyone else in the room, and that made me tear up as well. It was getting so bad I wanted to tell him to pull himself together.

Koharu was really leaving the nest. It felt like part of me was being ripped away. Like I was empty inside.

At that moment, I heard Koharu say, “Mom?” as if calling out to me.

“You’ve helped me so much in my life.

“So from now on, I want you to enjoy your own life. You’ve given me more than enough.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.

“It’s my turn to give you the same happiness you gave me.

“When I think about that, I can’t help but feel excited.

“I never thought I would get this worked up.

“Mom.

“Thank you for making me so happy.

“I’m so happy that you brought me into this world. So happy to be me.

“I’ve received the support and kindness of so many people.

“And I had the privilege of meeting Kakeru.

“Let me say it one more time:

“Thank you so much for giving birth to me.

“Thank you so much for being my mom.

“I hope one day I can be like you.”

Those words were too much for me to bear.

I’d given her such a painful life. “Thank you so much for giving birth to me” was the last thing I’d expected to hear. I burst into uncontrollable sobs,

covering my mouth to stifle them.

"Let's hear a word from Koharu's mother," the emcee said, passing me the mic.

I was crying so hard, I couldn't even speak. *Why would you hand me the microphone now?* I thought, embarrassed.

Somehow, I managed to force out a few words.

"Koharu. Thank you for being born."

8. Koharu Sorano
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♫

It’s strange. For some reason, every time my health took a turn for the worse, I got the urge to listen to Kakeru’s version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

I would fumble about for my voice recorder, put in my earbuds, and press PLAY.

Kakeru’s youthful voice from when we first met would stream into my ears.

Concentrating on his words as hard as I could, I felt at peace.

This time, though, it didn’t seem to help.

After getting married, Kakeru and I had a little girl named Sakura. Everything had been going well until last year, when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I determinedly underwent the necessary treatment—but eventually, they ran out of options, and I was transferred to hospice care.

I opted for in-home care.

Strangely, I felt no pain or suffering. Things were much harder when I was making a serious effort to recover.

Right now, I was able to enjoy a slow, peaceful life with Kakeru and, sometimes, with Sakura. We didn’t have much time left together, but I wanted our final moments as a family to be full of laughter.

While Kakeru went out to shop for dinner, I leaned back against the bed and basked in the sunlight. Enveloped in its warm glow, I listened to Kakeru’s voice and reminisced about the past.

That was when the idea came to me.

Kakeru had given me so much, I wanted to leave something behind for him.

After some consideration, I came up with the perfect idea.

I waited for Kakeru’s reading of *The Diary of Anne Frank* to come to an end and pressed RECORD on the voice recorder.

“Dear Kakeru, first of all, please forgive me for passing away before you.”

Trying to sound as composed as I could, I wished that Kakeru would continue to lead a happy life.

“I’m sorry about that. Things were hard for me this time.”

Although I genuinely felt sorry, surprisingly, I wasn't totally overwhelmed by sadness.

Of course, it was a shame to have to leave Kakeru and Sakura behind, but they'd already given me so many wonderful things.

When I thought about that, I felt nothing but joy.

After Kakeru proposed, we got engaged and began living separately, albeit in the same neighborhood. Like any other couple living in separate homes, we started staying over at each other's place—and to my surprise, I became pregnant.

I had to take another leave of absence from college, which angered my father and caused its fair share of problems, but I had no regrets. I was going to be a mother! It was beyond my wildest dreams.

Kakeru and I started living together and got married. We had the wedding before my belly got too big.

When we exchanged the rings during the ceremony, I chose to use that special ring he'd given me. Kakeru told me he'd wanted me to have a diamond big enough for me to feel, and his mother explained that she'd wanted to pass it on to me, after she had been given it by her mother-in-law. It made me so happy when I heard how they both felt.

At the reception, Kakeru squinted in the bright spotlight as he made his speech. A lot of people turned up to celebrate our special day, including Yuuko and Narumi.

I read out a letter for my mother, too—but in the end, it was my dad who cried the most.

Not long after that, I gave birth to our daughter.

The idea of not being able to see my child's face made me apprehensive, and disappointed. But to my surprise, as soon as I held my newborn daughter against my chest, all those worries evaporated.

Ah, thank you so much for being born.

She was so soft and squishy. I felt so overcome with happiness.

We named our daughter Sakura, meaning "to bloom beautifully."

I wanted her to be someone who stood by others, helping their happiness bloom.

With Kakeru's help, I devoted myself to bringing her up.

I was so busy that time seemed to fly by, but every second was filled with joy. I wondered if it had been the same for my parents.

Becoming a parent made me even more grateful for the upbringing they'd given me.

When I returned to college, Mom looked after Sakura while I was in class. Balancing child-rearing and the demands of school made every day a

whirlwind, yet I felt incredibly fulfilled. After all, every night, I had the pleasure of returning home to Kakeru and Sakura.

One summer break, Kakeru and I went to visit Shimonoseki. Sakura was turning three, and I'd finally adjusted to my hectic lifestyle.

My mother-in-law had visited us in Tokyo several times, but this was the first time we'd taken Sakura to Shimonoseki.

I also wanted to go to the Kanmon Straits Fireworks Festival, which Kakeru insisted would be busy.

"It's about to start."

We were waiting for the fireworks in the Dannoura area, close to the Kanmon Bridge. It was a spot Kakeru had recommended.

"Mommy. Mommy," I heard Sakura say.

"Sorry, Koharu. She wants her mom."

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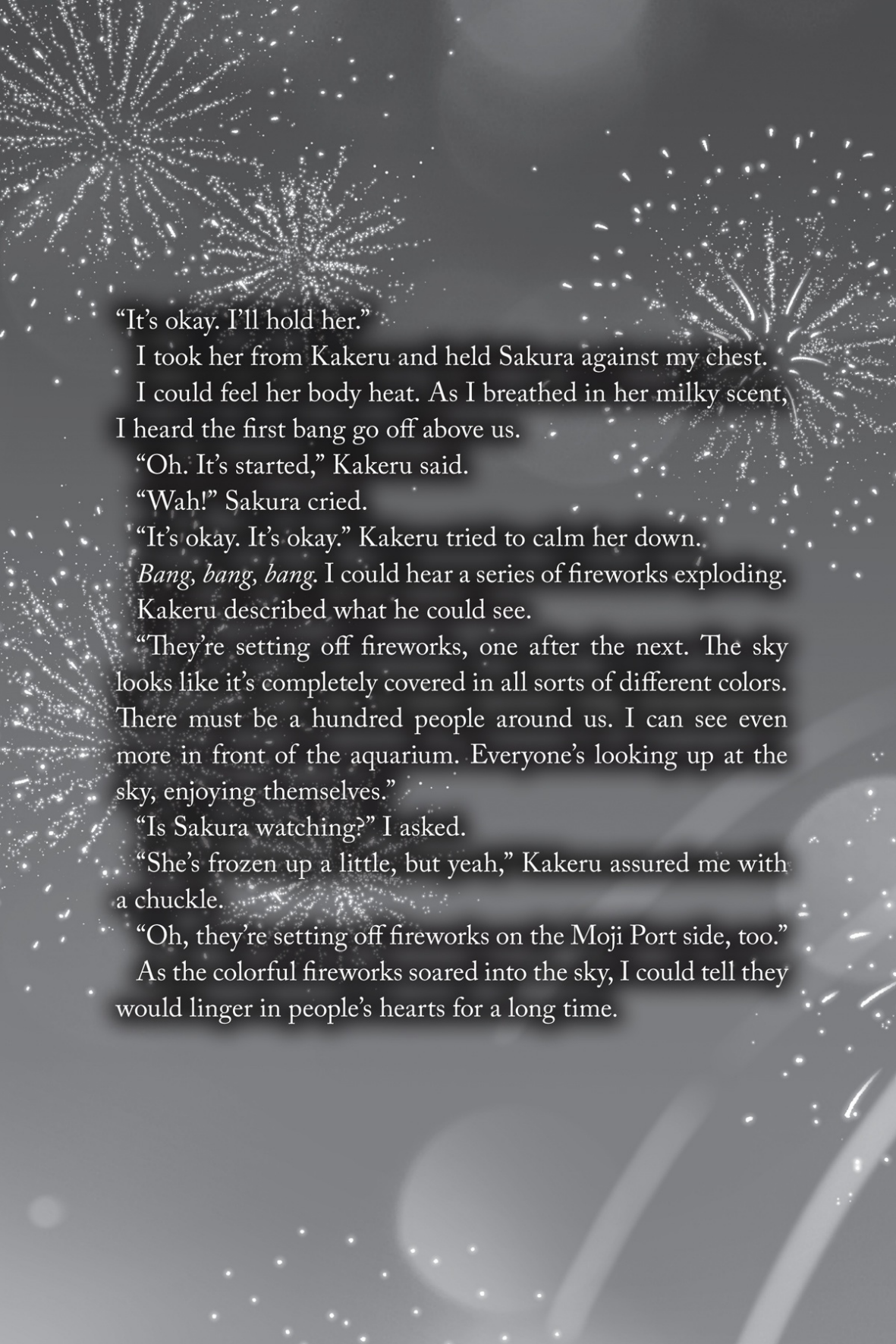

"It's okay. I'll hold her."

I took her from Kakeru and held Sakura against my chest.

I could feel her body heat. As I breathed in her milky scent, I heard the first bang go off above us.

"Oh. It's started," Kakeru said.

"Wah!" Sakura cried.

"It's okay. It's okay." Kakeru tried to calm her down.

Bang, bang, bang. I could hear a series of fireworks exploding.

Kakeru described what he could see.

"They're setting off fireworks, one after the next. The sky looks like it's completely covered in all sorts of different colors. There must be a hundred people around us. I can see even more in front of the aquarium. Everyone's looking up at the sky, enjoying themselves."

"Is Sakura watching?" I asked.

"She's frozen up a little, but yeah," Kakeru assured me with a chuckle.

"Oh, they're setting off fireworks on the Moji Port side, too."

As the colorful fireworks soared into the sky, I could tell they would linger in people's hearts for a long time.

That was a wonderful thought.

Just then, I heard a high-pitched sound against my chest.

"Is Sakura laughing?"

"She is. It's funny, she looked so scared a minute ago."

Sakura continued to squeal with laughter as the fireworks went off in the background. In my mind, I pictured the night sky being painted in its vibrant hues.

I prayed that Sakura's life would be colorful, just like the fireworks above us. As that thought flashed through my mind, it struck me how lucky I was to be able to make such a wish.

For some reason, I was reminded of that day while I recorded my message.

"Say, Kakeru?

"You're not assuming I had any regrets, are you?

"When I think about it, leaving you and Sakura behind is undeniably sad. But during that summer when I was nineteen, I had already made peace with the idea of my death.

"When you look at it from that perspective, do I really have anything to regret?

"It all started when I gave in to your stubbornness—that day I gave up on giving up on you.

"Every single day since I chose not to give up on life has been filled with joy.

"Every single moment has left an imprint on my heart—just like fireworks."

That's right.

I had met Kakeru, and he'd chosen to stay by my side.

The days he shared with me sparkled in my memory.

"Oh, I've been so happy. I've had such a wonderful life!

"Thank you, Kakeru.

"Thank you for meeting me. Thank you for choosing me."

The words poured out from the depths of my heart.

Every now and then, I found myself wondering what happiness really meant. The way I saw it, happiness was just finding someone who would stick by your side no matter what.

Amid innumerable possibilities, a miracle had brought Kakeru and me together. Among so many people, he'd chosen me.

If there was such a thing as happiness, that was it.

When I closed my eyes, the colorful life that Kakeru and I had shared came to mind.

I'm so glad I met him.

Afterword

Thank you all for waiting so long.

Initially, I wrote this book from Kakeru's perspective. But once I'd finished, I went to my editor with an outrageous request:

"Sorry, but could you let me rewrite the whole book from Koharu Fuyutsuki's point of view?"

During our meetings, it dawned on me that the story was actually about Koharu, and I desperately wanted to rewrite it from her perspective. I decided just to throw the idea out there, but my proposal would mean reexamining our entire schedule. I braced myself for a furious response, knowing that delaying the publication of a book was bad for business. That's why my editor's reaction came as a surprise: "I'd like to read that. Go ahead and write it. I'm happy to wait."

That response made me so happy. It was probably just a casual remark, but as a writer, it was music to my ears.

Thanks to my editor's encouragement, I was able to release this book in its current form.

At the end of the day, it's the people you meet that make the difference. I was lucky to meet my editor after entering the GA Bunko Award contest, just as Kakeru and Koharu were fortunate to meet one another. That was the greatest blessing for both characters.

The previous volume, *Love Unseen Beneath the Clear Night Sky*, led me to meet a lot of new people—the readers whom I was lucky enough to meet, the staff from Animate Ikebukuro who let me hold a book signing there, the people from Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology who let me

interview them, everybody involved in the manga adaptation, everyone who supported me in the Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi! competition, everybody who shared their support on social media, all the more established writers I've had the privilege to meet, the staff from the editorial department, and of course, raemz. I'm grateful for all the encounters I've had and excited for all the encounters the future has in store for me.

If you feel the same way about encountering this book, then all my efforts will have been worthwhile.

Let me express my thanks to some of the many people who've helped me bring this book to you.

First of all, to raemz, who once again drew incredible high-resolution illustrations for me.

Seeing such a heartfelt smile on Koharu's face made me so happy.

Thank you to my editor, Nakamura, all the people who shared their feedback, and everybody involved in the publication of this book, from printing to sales. If it wasn't for all their support, I wouldn't have been able to bring this book to my readers. I'm so, so grateful. Thank you all so much.

This book hit shelves in Japan on the same day as my new novel *When the Night Ends, the Sun Rises*. I'd really appreciate it if you picked up a copy. I put my heart and soul into writing it, so it would make me happy if it leaves an impression on you in some way.

I'm going to keep working as hard as I can, so I hope you all continue to support me.

Nanigashi Shima

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